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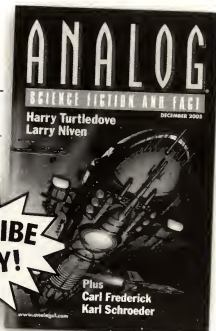
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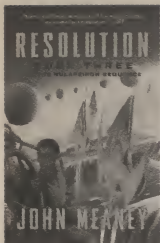
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JUNE 2006

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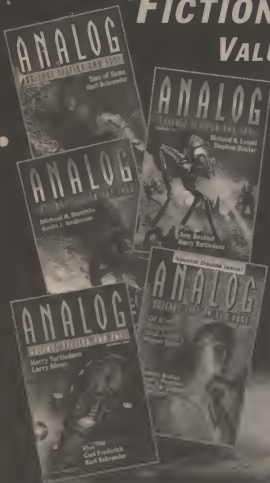
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THE YELLOW PILL—OR, ALTERED PERCEPTIONS

"The Yellow Pill" in Rog Phillips's classic 1958 *Astounding* story, strengthens the user's perception of reality so that "reality practically shouts down any fantasy insertions." Clearly, anyone under the influence of the yellow pill would have a hard time trying to read, understand, enjoy, and validate science fiction and fantasy.

The school year at my high school carried on for about a week past final exams and graduation. The underclass students' work during that week wouldn't count for a grade so the school offered a number of mini pass/fail courses. One of the subjects offered my senior year was science fiction. The teacher responsible for the class invited me back after graduation to help him teach it. I found it fun and rewarding to be a "teacher" at my own school, but the experience was also enlightening.

Rog Phillips's story was included in the syllabus. To me it was a fairly traditional SF story, filled with third-class freighters and blue-scaled Venusian space pirates. To the students, it was something completely different. For all of them, and perhaps even the teacher, it was a story about a psychiatrist treating an unstable person who thought he was on a spaceship. When the psychiatrist began to think that *he* was on a spaceship, the class was convinced the doctor had gone insane, too. Admittedly, Phillips has fun playing with the

reader's perception of reality, but the story was first published in a science fiction magazine in the fifties and repeatedly anthologized in SF books. These are fairly strong clues that the story probably contains some straightforward science fiction concepts. As I recall, though, I failed to sway a single person in the room.

At the time, I assumed that the readers simply hadn't yet acquired their science-fiction "legs." Like the kids I knew who'd moved north from Florida and who had had to learn how to walk on snow, I figured the students would get SF once they had a little more exposure to the subject. That may have been true for most of them. They must have appreciated some aspects of SF and/or fantasy or they wouldn't have signed up for the course. But I believed that, once exposed to the "good stuff," everyone would be capable of appreciating fantastic literature. Alas, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary.

In a March 3, 1996, New York *Times* review of an Ursula K. Le Guin collection, Francine Prose lamented that some of the fiction in *Unlocking the Air and Other Stories* was full of the tired ideas only a science fiction reader could love. She compared some of Ms. Le Guin's stories about aliens to the work of college freshmen, and suggested that perhaps the author would have been better served if her stories had been split into two books that would have appealed

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more to each of her separate audiences. Then, taking the flip side of my own position, she suggested that perhaps it was better that the book hadn't been divided up after all, because science fiction readers might accidentally stumble upon "the many-layered story 'Ether, OR,'" and by encountering Ms. Le Guin's "deft tricks with narrative techniques," "light-handed sureness," and "genuinely intriguing ideas" those readers might start to take pleasure in the author's complex fiction as well. Interestingly, Ms. Prose did not seem to realize that "Ether, OR" was first published in the November 1995 issue of *Asimov's*. Noting this fact, though, might have undermined her apparent assumption that people who enjoy science fiction and fantasy have to be completely ignorant. If only we'd snap out of it, she seemed to imply, and take that yellow pill, it's possible we could actually be taught how to read English, too.

Well, that was years ago, you might say, and in a fuddy-duddy old newspaper, too. And even if Ms. Prose and her ilk haven't discovered the antidote to that pill, surely younger readers are more open to the wild subjects that pervade today's SF and fantasy. After all, 2005 brought broad recognition to authors whose work has also appeared in *Asimov's*. Jonathan Lethem won the MacArthur "genius grant." Maureen McHugh's *Mothers and Other Monsters* was nominated for The Story Prize. The 2005 *Best American Short Stories* anthology included stories by Cory Doctorow, Tim Pratt, and recent Hugo- and Nebula-award-winner, Kelly Link. Both *Time* and *Salon.com* chose Ms. Link's *Magic for Be-*

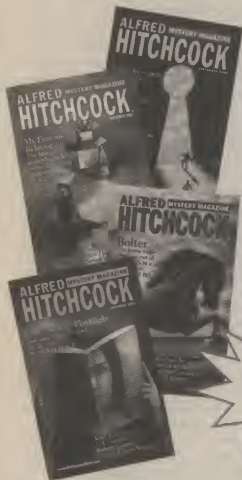
ginners for their top-ten list of 2005 books. Yet a review of the same collection in the August/September 2005 issue of *Bust*, a magazine with a young feminist following, maintained that only those who could swallow an absurd premise would be taken with the book. Admitting her own strong preference for realistic fiction, the reviewer indicated that the author's stories had confused her and that only a writer guilty of a certain intellectual laziness would place "such absolutely human, flawed characters inside such baffling, uncanny plotlines."

So the *Times* reviewer and the supposedly hip *Bust* reviewer have had the chance to read SF and fantasy by some of the best writers of our day. Yet, they still haven't acquired their science fiction legs. They're still confused by zombies and fairies and aliens. They still don't have much tolerance for stories that veer far from everyday reality, and they can't imagine why anyone professing any level of intelligence does. Well, I'll continue to read Rog Phillips and other SF and fantasy writers for fun, and maybe even for their "light-handed sureness," "intriguing ideas," and absurd premises, but I intend to keep Rog's medicine cabinet nailed shut. My sense of reality is just fine, thank you, but I don't intend to let it interfere with my sense of the fantastic. ○

This editorial was inspired by the ED SF Project <<http://edsfproject.blogspot.com>>, a homage to the late Scifiiction. At press time, "The Yellow Pill" was still archived online at http://www.scifi.com/scifiiction/classics/classics_archive/phillips/index.html. ○

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SIXTUS THE SIXTH

Even in the high-tech twenty-first century, putting out magazines like this is a complicated affair, still involving a lot of low-tech stuff like editing and proofreading and printing and binding and stapling and shipping, and so I have to write these columns many months in advance. For you, down there in 2006, the story of the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of his successor is old news, and the world's attention is focused somewhere else. But for me, back here in the previous year like a stranded time traveler, the fascinating story out of the Vatican is still making the big headlines. In my time-line, the new pope—Benedict XVI, the former Cardinal Ratzinger—was elected just a few days ago.

Why, you may wonder, does this matter to me, and why should I think that it does to you? Does the election of a pope have anything to do with science fiction? Well, no, not usually. But I did actually write a science fiction story about just such an event ("Good News from the Vatican") back in 1971. That story is definitely science fiction, since the new pope turns out to be a robot, and I won a Nebula for it. So I myself provide a link of sorts between the papacy and science fiction. And not just for that story, as you'll discover in a moment.

Am I, then, a devout Roman Catholic? Nope. I'm not a devout Catholic nor a lapsed one nor even a Christian at all. Like Isaac Asimov, who wrote these columns be-

fore me, I was born into the Jewish faith. As it was with Isaac also, my Judaism has always been entirely a matter of cultural background rather than religious observance, but Jewish is what I call myself whenever I'm asked about my religious affiliations.

It will, then, seem quite odd to you—and it certainly ought to—that I have often been heard to say, over the past four decades or so, that it's my ambition to become pope. I've even picked out a papal name for myself: Sixtus the Sixth. (The first pope of that name attained the post in 115 AD, and was, by a curious coincidence, the sixth pope to follow St. Peter, who was the first holder of the title. Fourteen centuries later, Sixtus the Fourth was responsible for the construction of the Sistine Chapel, which is named for him. But no pope has called himself Sixtus since Sixtus the Fifth chose the name in 1585, and there is something about being called Sixtus the Sixth that I find irresistible.)

What gave me the notion of becoming pope in the first place was, in fact, a remarkable if obscure fantasy novel—ah, the relevance to this magazine's readership surfaces!—by the eccentric English novelist Frederick Rolfe: *Hadrian the Seventh*, first published in 1904, still in print, and well worth the attention of the curious.

Rolfe (1860-1913), who liked to call himself "Baron Corvo" without any genealogical justification, was

a prickly, difficult, brilliant man, surely afflicted with a touch of paranoia, who, as a twenty-six-year-old schoolmaster, converted to Catholicism, sought to enter the priesthood, was rejected, and spent the rest of his life as an impoverished, embittered recluse. He was, however, a gifted novelist, and his masterpiece, *Hadrian the Seventh*, is perhaps the ultimate in wish-fulfillment fantasies, for it concerns one George Arthur Rose, a convert to Catholicism who is thwarted in his attempt to become a priest, lives for years as an impoverished, embittered recluse, and then gains the sympathetic ear of an English member of the College of Cardinals, who agrees that a great injustice has been done to him. Just then the pope dies, and Rose accompanies his new friend, the cardinal, to Rome for the election of a successor. The electoral conclave is deadlocked for days—and then, abruptly, an astounding compromise is reached in which George Arthur Rose, the rejected priest, is chosen as the new pope at the English cardinal's suggestion.

It is a surprising moment, though Rolfe manages somehow to make it seem almost plausible. Rose himself is flabbergasted. But he rises quickly to the occasion, for he is, of course, not only deeply religious but a man of almost superhuman genius. His first papal act is to choose his regnal name: because the last pope of English birth was Hadrian the Fourth, he will call himself Hadrian as well, Hadrian the Seventh, as he grandly announces: "It pleases Us, and so, by Our Own impulse, We command."

He commands a great deal after that. Frederick Rolfe plainly had been pondering the imperfections

of the world for many years, and Pope Hadrian briskly goes about remedying those imperfections according to his creator's wishes.

He begins by appointing half a dozen old friends to the College of Cardinals; then he lets it be known that the Church will henceforth hew more closely to the teachings of Jesus, and to that end he sells off the vast art treasures of the Vatican and has the money used for charitable purposes; he redesigns the crucifix; and, finally, declaring that the pope is in fact the absolute ruler of the whole world, he resurrects the Roman Empire, appoints Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany as Emperor of the North and King Victor Emanuel of Italy as Emperor of the South, merges all of northern Europe from France to Russia into the northern empire, and awards the other European nations, apart from England, to the southern one. By a similar process he bestows all of Latin America on the United States and gives England control of Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, and all of Asia except Siberia, which goes to Japan. "Thus," Rolfe writes, "the Supreme Arbitrator provided the human race with scope and opportunity for energy." An international treaty is drawn up confirming these papal decrees and the nations of the world, obligingly falling in line, sign it in St. Peter's Square. And so it goes, until a Socialist crackpot assassinates Hadrian and he is wafted off to heaven in an aura of sanctity.

That extraordinary novel, much less nutty than my synopsis makes it sound, set me to thinking. If someone who isn't even a priest can find himself pope one afternoon, I asked myself, why not

someone who isn't even Christian? Why not, for example, *me*?

A little research indicated that although no one who was not already a member of the College of Cardinals has become pope since the twelfth century or thereabouts, there is ample precedent for choosing a layman. In the year 236, for example, a farmer from the provinces, one Fabian, was visiting Rome when the election of a new pope became necessary. Popes were not chosen by secret ballot then, as they are now, and Fabian was a spectator at the deliberations when a dove suddenly fluttered down and settled on his head. The assembled brethren were reminded of the scene in the Gospels of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, and saw this as a divine instruction to make Fabian pope. He reigned for fourteen years. Eight centuries later, when Pope Benedict VIII died in 1024, his brother Romano seized the papal throne, had himself ordained as a priest and then as a bishop the same day, and took the name of John XIX. He was pope for the next eight years.

I conceived a similar bold ambition. This was about 1957; Pius XII was pope, and he was not in good health. I told some of my friends that I would offer myself as a candidate when a successor was needed. The writer Randall Garrett, with whom I had collaborated on many SF stories back then, fastened enthusiastically on the idea. (Randall was an Anglican, not a Roman Catholic, but he took religious matters seriously.) He envisaged an all-day ceremony that would begin early in the morning with my baptism, proceed a little later to my entry into the priesthood, and so on up the ladder until

by nightfall I had attained the papal throne itself.

"You will then announce the name under which you will reign," said Garrett, "and then you'll appear on the balcony of St. Peter's, and utter your first blessing to the city and the world. —By the way, have you given any thought to what name you'll choose?"

In fact I had. The last pope who had been born as a Jew was the first one, St. Peter. No pope had been called Peter since. I would be Peter II, I told him. But in the discussion that followed, I came to see that that might be going too far, verging on *hybris*, that useful Greek term for overweening pride that merits divine vengeance. (There's a somewhat similar term in Yiddish—*chutzpah*.) I didn't want to be guilty of either sin, and so I studied the list of previous popes for a while and discovered eventually, to my great delight, that the name of Sixtus the Sixth was waiting to be chosen.

I speak above of how, when Frederick Rolfe's Hadrian became pope, he proceeded to transform the Church and the world in the most extensive way. I had certain reforms of my own in mind, too, once I was in charge. I was, as it happened, married—so something had to be done about priestly celibacy. I wanted to reward Randall Garrett for his assistance and advice by making him Archbishop of Canterbury, since he was an Anglican, but that would require my bringing the Church of England back into the Roman Catholic fold. Therefore I was willing to back off a little way on the issue of papal supremacy, which had caused the rift in the first place, and issue a retroactive divorce to King Henry VIII. And so forth.

As it happened, a vacancy in the papacy developed in 1958, but the cardinals ignored my application and chose John XXIII as pope. In the following years I tried for the job again and again, but was rebuffed in favor of, successively, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and now Benedict XVI. But I am still young, as potential popes go. I continue to live in hope. The world may yet see the reign of Sixtus the Sixth. (My robot pope from "Good News from the Vatican," incidentally, proclaims himself to be Sixtus the Seventh—a little inside joke by the author.)

The custom by which the incoming pope picks his own regnal name, by the way, got started in 532, when one Mercurius was elected. It seemed like a bad idea for the pope to bear the name of a pagan god, so he chose to rule as John II. Gradually it came to be

the custom for every new pope to take a special name, often that of some great earlier predecessor. The last who kept his given name was a certain Marcellus, elected in 1555. There had already been a pope Marcellus, in the fourth century, so he simply named himself Marcellus II. Since then most new popes have used recycled names—primarily Clement, Innocent, Gregory, Leo, Pius, or Benedict.

But the newest Pope Benedict has one distinction that sets him apart from the fifteen previous popes of that name: an e-mail address. If you want to write to him in English, you can reach him at *benedictxvi@vatican.va*. He can be addressed also as *benedetto* (Italian), *benedicto* (Spanish), *benoit* (French), *bento* (Portuguese), or *benedikt* (German). O brave new century, where the pope has an e-mail address! ○

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ADVENTURES IN PODCASTING

missed

Let's start with a confession: I blew my big chance to get in on the ground floor of podcasting. Way back in August 2004 **Dave Slusher** <<http://www.evilgeniuschronicles.org/wordpress>>, world renowned Evil Genius and interviewer extraordinaire, asked me to be the inaugural guest on his podcast **Voices in Your Head** <<http://www.itconversations.com/series/voicesinyourhead.html>>.

"Sure," sez I, "but what the hell is a podcast?" Understand that this was scant weeks after the podfather **Adam Curry** <<http://live.curry.com/>> launched **Ipodder** <<http://www.ipodder.org/history>>. I'd started posting mp3 files of me reading my own stories to my website just six months before and Dave thought I was a natural to join the revolution. He urged me to jump into podcasting.

The thing is, although I'm a geek wannabe, I am also, alas, an often-befuddled English major. This whole podcasting thing gave off a serious **early adopter** <<http://www.zonalatina.com/Zldata99.htm>> vibe that promised headaches, heartbreaks, and long hours perusing FAQ's of obscure websites. I was way overdue on a short novel I was supposed to write for **Tachyon Publications** <<http://www.tachyonpublications.com>> so

I gave Dave the **interview** <<http://www.itconversations.com/shows/detail219.html>> and filed podcasting away as a possible subject for a future column.

D'oh! <<http://www.snpp.com/guides/dohs.html>>

So here's that column, now that the cutting edge has long since passed me by. Had I been writing this six months ago, at this point in the column, I would give you a short explanation of podcasting. But just to show you how far behind the edge I am here, I just recycled last Sunday's *Boston Globe*, and **Parade Magazine** <http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2005/edition_11-20-2005/featured_3>, *ferchrissakes*, had an article about podcasting. By the time *Parade* covers a story, it's more like history than news. Suffice it to say that anyone who has an iPod or an mp3 player, which I figure must include about 87.4 percent of you, probably has a pretty good idea of what podcasting is and what it can do. If not, just check the **Wikipedia** <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting>>.

talknet

More people can talk than can write.

This may not seem like the most profound insight that has ever ap-

peared in this space, but it helps explain the avalanche of podcasts that has already come crashing down on us—with many more on the way. Of course, there are hurdles that any would-be podcaster must overcome before she gets onto the talknet; despite assurances from podcast evangelists, the technology is not quite ready for primetime. More on that in a moment. However, while it is certainly the case that there are many barely literate bloggers, the fact is that lack of writing skills has served as a kind of filter for keeping certain people off the net. But once it is possible to plug a microphone into a computer and use a friendly software application to record and post to the talknet, everybody and his cousin will be podcasting. Perhaps you have been put off on occasion by the wrong-headedness and banality of some blogs. Well, it could be worse. Imagine what talk radio would be like if there were no articulate and relatively sane hosts to rein in the rambling and relatively deranged callers. Welcome to the talknet.

It's been my personal experience, alas, that it's a hell of a lot easier for me to say something stupid than it is to write something stupid; rarely can I listen to an interview I've given without cringing. On some podcasts I've listened to, the quantity of chatter seems to matter more than the quality of thought. Oftentimes these shows will consist of two or more speakers who seem to be modeling themselves on drivetime shockjocks. They interrupt and insult one another, often in the process losing their train of thought. They crack wise about sex and beer and skiffy flicks and reward each other with

guffaws in a kind of grotesque comedic codependency.

And what's particularly ominous about these meretricious and babblicious podcasts is that they've been created by the smart people. Or at least, smarter than me. I won't rehearse all the difficulties I had in getting my own podcast on line, other than to say that I spent at least four days of headaches, heartbreaks, and long hours perusing FAQ's of obscure websites (see above). As it is, I finally had to settle for what feels like a roundabout and kludgy link to the talknet. First, I created a blog on **Blogger** <<http://www.blogger.com>>, an easy-to-use free service. My blog points to mp3 files available on the non-podcasting but otherwise downloadable **Free Reads** <http://www.jimkelly.net/pages/free_reads.htm> page on my website. The problem is that Blogger can only create feeds in the **Atom** <<http://help.blogger.com/bin/answer.py?answer=697>> format, but you need a **RSS 2.0** <http://www.podcastingnews.com/articles/Understanding_RSS_Feeds.html> feed in order to podcast. Luckily, another free service, **Feedburner** <<http://www.feedburner.com>> can translate Atom into RSS. I highly recommend Feedburner, by the way. The support staff rocks! Anyway, there's a clear explanation of all this on **Podcasting News** <http://www.podcastingnews.com/articles/Make_Podcast_Blogger.html>, along with all sorts of other information you need to know.

But wait, there's more! In order to post a podcast, you must first create one. For that, you need an audio editor and recorder. Yes, friends, you too can learn audio engineering in your spare time. The software of choice here is **Audaci-**

ty <<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>>, freeware available for Mac OS X, Windows, and Linux. I'd be using Audacity myself except that several years ago I popped for a commercial program, **Sound Forge Audio Studio** <<http://www.sonymedia.com/software/products/showproduct.asp?pid=975>> and I have so much time invested in learning its foibles that I can't possibly switch at this late date.

The point here is that although someday there may be fairly transparent software that manages all aspects of podcasting from recording to editing to posting, that day is not yet here. Take it from me, creating your own podcasts is not for the timid.

listen up

Okay, okay, maybe you don't want to make a podcast. You just want to listen to a couple. Fortunately, "podcatching" is pretty straightforward. A major breakthrough for podcasting occurred when Apple's **iTunes** <<http://www.apple.com/iTunes>> opted to carry podcasts. Downloading shows to your iPod is pretty much the same as downloading music onto it, only the podcasts are free. But iTunes is totally Apple-centric. If you have anyone else's mp3 player, you need a different application. There are scads available, but my two favorites are **Juice** <<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/index.php>> (formerly Ipodder) and **Feed Demon** <<http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon>>. How are you going to find podcasts to listen to? Well, keep reading; I promise to give you some pick SF hits. But you should also click over to podcasting directories like **Ipod-**

der.org <<http://www.ipodder.org>>, **Podcast.net** <<http://www.podcast.net>>, and **The Science Fiction Podcast Network** <<http://www.tsfpn.com/tsfpn/index.html>>.

So here, in no particular order, are some of the podcasts currently loaded onto my **Nomad MuVo** <<http://www.nomadworld.com/products/muvo>>:

The Rev Up Review <<http://www.revupreview.co.uk>> is an eclectic mix of reviews, comment, rant, and original fiction offered up by one Paul J, from Portsmouth, England. Paul is one of the most astute SF podcasters on the net.

The Dragon Page <<http://www.dragonpage.com>> is actually home to three, count 'em, three, different podcasts brought to you by the easygoing team of Evo Terra and Michael R. Mennenga. My favorite of these is the Cover to Cover show, which features author interviews. Michael and Evo have a lot of fun with their podcasts and you will too.

The Secrets <<http://stormwolf.com/theseconds/podcasts/index.html>> offers "invaluable tips, tricks and tools for serious writers" from writer Michael J. Stackpole. While this podcast may offer too much insider info for the general reader, Michael's presentation is clear and his points are for the most part well taken. Aspiring writers should check this out forthwith. I must admit, however, that every so often I found myself itching to debate Michael on some of his pronouncements.

I Should Be Writing <<http://shouldwrite.blogspot.com>>, hosted and produced by Mur Lafferty, is another podcast aimed at new writers. I have to confess that, even though I haven't been a new writer

since Nixon resigned, I was utterly charmed by this sensible and unpretentious show. Highly recommended.

Escape Pod <<http://escapepod.org>> is one of the most ambitious SF podcasts and probably my current favorite. Produced by Steve Ely, it bills itself as "The Science Fiction Podcast Magazine" and features regular readings of short and flash fiction. Much of what you can hear on Escape Pod are "reprints" previously published in print venues and performed by Steve's talented stable of readers.

Podiobooks <<http://www.podiobooks.com>> is still in beta as I write this, but is nonetheless up and running nicely, thank you very much. This site is brought to you by the triumvirate of Evo Terro, Tee Morris, and Chris Miller, and is dedicated to longer works of fiction than Escape Pod. That's right, novels—but podcast in episodes. I'm watching this one with great anticipation.

Spaceship Radio <<http://spaceshipradio.com>>, hosted and produced by Andy Doan, plays public domain Sci/Fi radio plays from the forties and fifties (mostly from *X Minus 1* so far) as well as new work submitted by listeners. Lest you think this is merely an exercise in nostalgia, Andy does an excellent job of putting the issues raised by these radio plays into the current context.

The Fantasy Times <<http://www.thefantasytimes.com/podcast>.

htm> is home to the Fantasy Times Podcast and The Fantasy Minute. Both are the creations of Galaphile, who is at once a keen observer of the current fantasy scene and a shrewd critic. Galaphile's tastes are refreshingly eclectic; you're not going to have to suffer through "me too" opinions about the same tired old subjects on this podcast.

exit

As I said at the outset, I missed out on being a podcast pioneer. But I was intrigued by the idea of podcasting and so I set out to try it. As I write this, I am reading a new novella on my own podcast, **Free Reads** <<http://feeds.feedburner.com/freereads>>—a chapter a week for sixteen weeks. But by the time you read this, I will have long since finished. And I must say that, while I certainly don't regret creating my podcast, I'm not sure just how devoted I am to it. I'm a writer, not an actor or a sound engineer or a webmaster. You may very well click over to Free Reads only to find that it's a ghost site that hasn't been updated in months.

And that, I fear, may be the fate of much of the first wave of podcasts. Podcasting is a lot of work for little or no pay or recognition. Because I expect a major shakeout, I haven't a clue yet as to where this brave new tech is headed or what it means.

But I have my ear on it. ○

READERS: If you are having problems finding *Asimov's Science Fiction* at your favorite retailer, we want to help. First let the store manager know that you want the store to carry *Asimov's*. Then send us a letter or postcard telling us the full name and address of the store (with street name and number, if possible). Write to us at: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Thank you!

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly has two new books out from Tachyon Publications: a novella, *Burn*, about forest fires, Henry David Thoreau, baseball, and apples and *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*, co-edited with John Kessel. He recently joined the faculty of the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program. In his latest story for us, Jim views a new sort of drama from a very unusual perspective.

The *Leila Torn Show* was nervous as she surveyed the audience on the studio monitor, trying to get a feel for their mood. When her band played her theme song as Slappy O'Toole stepped onto the set for the pre-show warm up, their fanfare was ragged. Chill, the band leader, glared at Bebop, the trumpet player, and Bebop stared at his shoes. *The Leila Torn Show* could see the studio audience shifting uncomfortably in their seats. She winced as Slappy's jokes bounced off them. Maybe they were just tired. Or hearing-impaired. Or Estonian. A bead of sweat glistened just below Slappy's receding hairline.

The Leila Torn Show had known all along that there would be a huge letdown after last week's episode, when she had killed off her main character. But she had to push on. If she could just hold her own through tonight, she'd be all right.

Her content providers were already looking ahead. In the comedy segment of next week's episode, they wanted to send someone to the dentist. The ceepees hadn't decided who it would be yet, although Slappy had already put in his bid. *The Leila Torn Show* felt sorry for him; he was in just one scene this week and he had only two lines, a joke about the weather. Her staff demographer had explained to him that his numbers skewed old and fat. Grandmas with deep fryers wrote him fan email but they didn't buy enough upscale product.

The ceepees were pitching her a waiting room scene for the dentist episode that would feature two or three oddballs.

"Odd but wacky," Cass said.

"In a surreal way," said Graves, the head content provider.

Then would come a teeth-cleaning scene. Margo Rain, the guest talent, was to play the chatty hygienist. She'd go blonde, of course, and pump up her boobs a cup size. And the hemline of her uniform dress would be short as a sinner's memory. "She'll stop the eighteen to twenty-five-year-old males in mid-click," said Graves. "Remotes will fall from their trembling hands." But it wouldn't do to stereotype Margo Rain. After all, she was a legitimate actress, not bound to any one show. She had the complete works of Ibsen loaded into her memory. Euripides. Edward Albee. *The Leila Torn Show* was courting respect this season. She was tired of going for the cheap laugh.

"Thing is, I can't help the way I look," Slappy told the audience as he wiped his forehead with a limp handkerchief. "Me, I've always been hard on the eye, so you might say." He puffed out his cheeks. "I mean, I was so ugly as a kid that I had to trick or treat over the phone."

A ripple passed through the first four rows of the studio but died there. *The Leila Torn Show* snorted in disgust. The studio audience was still breathing, but that seemed to be all they were capable of at the moment.

The ceepees were proposing a classic complication for the crime segment of next week's episode. After one of the talent—probably not poor Slappy—finished getting his teeth cleaned, he would grab his trenchcoat and leave. Only he'd get the wrong coat, one belonging to a corrupt, wacky aide to a Congresswoman. The Congresswoman would also be played by Margo Rain. The wacky, corrupt aide intended to sell documents to the tabloid press proving that the Congresswoman had had an illegal personality boost. The talent with the clean teeth would eventually turn those papers over to Leila.

Or rather, the new Leila.

"Sure, I've put on a few pounds since the show started—I don't deny it. Hey, I've got the only car in town with stretch marks." Slappy clapped his hands to his paunch and bugged out his eyes hopefully, but the studio stayed as quiet as a snowfall.

The aide would then be poisoned and the Congresswoman would be accused of the murder, which would make this a case for Leila's law firm. Slappy currently worked as her chauffeur, although in the first few seasons, when he had been younger and slimmer, he had been her sidekick. He was always campaigning for more to do in the crime segments. Sometimes he got to cover the back entrance when Leila kicked in the front

door of the murderer's house. Mostly he just got the plot explained to him.

"And when I get home, it's the same. My wife says that I'm as useless as rubber lips on a woodpecker." Slappy's wife had been killed in Season Seven, although as far as *The Leila Torn Show* knew, he might have remarried in dreamspace. He clapped a hand over his eyes, waited a beat and then spread his fingers and peeked shyly through at the studio audience. She could barely stand to watch her oldest talent, now the sole survivor from the original cast, demean himself this way. But there wasn't much else he could do for her these days.

In next week's fantasy segment, Lucifer would stop the action as usual, just as the jury was about to return its verdict. The ceepees hadn't yet worked out what deal the devil would offer the Congresswoman for an acquittal. Cass was pitching a commitment to lower the voting age to thirteen, so they could cameo one of those teens from *Rock Zombie High* that everyone was talking about. Graves was holding out for a yes vote on equal rights for dogs; then they could cross-promote with the ongoing puppynappy series on *The Daily Now*.

Slappy gave up on the studio audience. He smeared a grin onto his round face and gave them a broad over-the-head wave. "Well, I'm glad you decided to stay, because we have another great show for you coming right up. Our guest tonight is Kent Turnabout from *Candy Asteroid*." Slappy nodded, waiting for the sleepy applause to die down. "I know you're really going to like this episode, folks, because I'm hardly in it at all."

Some lackwit in the back row gave him two sarcastic claps.

"Thanks, Mom." Slappy turned to the band. "How about a little vanishing music, Chill?" The band struck up "Turn Left on Lonely Street" and Slappy trotted into the wings.

The assistant whip, Herb Katz, gave him a sympathetic pat on the back. "Tough crowd tonight."

"I've seen happier gravestones." He pulled off his tie. "You make any decisions about the dentist skit next week?" He started to unbutton his shirt.

The Leila Torn Show decided it would be a kindness to break the bad news to Slappy then and there. "I think we're going to give it to Jay," said Herb. "He's a good fit, don't you think?" J. Timson Traylor was Leila's landlord, a know-it-all and a bit of a prig. "He can play grouchy in the waiting room scene and everyone will love it when Margo shuts him up by sticking a mirror and that little pointy thing into his mouth."

"A scaler," said Slappy. "It's called a scaler."

"If you say so." Herb's face went blank. "Nobody is going to know that's what it's called, Slap."

"I do." He dropped his shirt on the floor. "Jay will." A clothes snake slithered toward it. "I'll give it to the ceepees." The snake unhinged its jaw and swallowed the shirt. "Maybe they can tweak a gag out of it."

"Tell them to have Margo stick him with it."

Slappy stepped out of his pants and waved over his shoulder as he headed for the ceepees' den. *The Leila Torn Show* was grateful to have talent who still cared about her as much as Slappy O'Toole. He was a real team player. Of course, he had to be. He wasn't ever going to be spun off to

a show of his own. As the snake ate Slappy's pants, she decided to have her ceepees write him a new warmup set. Something less personal. Maybe about robots. Or Chinese food.

Herb Katz trudged down to the prop room and opened Anita Bright's closet. She shivered as the fluorescent light penetrated her dreamspace.

"Thirty minutes, Anita," said Herb. "Time to get dressed."

Anita growled and stretched. She was naked; most of the talent waited for their calls in the nude. It made costume changes go faster. Two clothes snakes coiled by the makeup table just outside the closet, waiting to disgorge Anita's underwear and blouse and the indigo Jacquard pantsuit she would wear in the crime scene. Anita was a detective working out of Homicide, who was Leila's nemesis and sometime lover. Old Leila. She had a delicious body; there was no question that appropriate curves had always been part of the show's appeal. But all that taut, creamy skin did nothing for Herb Katz, who was happily married to Chill Jensen, the band leader in dreamspace, where her talent lived when they weren't doing the show.

"How's the house?" said Anita, taking a seat at the makeup table.

"A freezer filled with mom and popsicles," said Herb. "Slappy barely got out alive."

"He needs better lines." Anita picked up the bra the snake had coughed into her lap. "We all do." She slipped it on.

"And the ceepees say they need fresh talent."

"Ceepees come and go," she said bitterly. "This cast has been earning the ratings for seventeen seasons."

"Seventeen is a lifetime in dog years."

In the studio overhead, Kent Turnabout was getting the first big laughs of the episode. The ceepees had him playing a funeral director, newly arrived from Mars, who hadn't quite adjusted to Earth's gravity. He flopped unexpectedly into mourners' laps, almost knocked Leila's closed coffin off its stand and then tried to apologize to it. The laughter pattered against the ceiling of the prop room like rain. "That sounds promising," said Herb.

The Leila Torn Show was relieved that the studio audience was finally reacting, even if it was only because of Turnabout's frenetic mugging. Sensing that he had to carry the comedy segment pretty much by himself, he buzzed around the set like the world's most smarmy fly. In comparison, her own talent seemed about as animated as office furniture. Still in shock over Leila's death, they offered him straight lines at arm's length and watched bleakly as he snatched laughs from their limp grasp. Turnabout was only the third male lead on *Candy Asteroid*, but he was one of the hottest talents on the Allview. He could pop a smile out of a meter maid just by arching an eyebrow. Already there was talk of spinning him off into his own show.

"The only reason they're laughing," said Anita, "is because the man is a lightweight. He hasn't got the brains that God gave to smoke. I swear, if he even looks sideways at the cameras while I'm testifying, I'm coming off the stand to kick the grin off his silly face."

"Easy, girl," said Herb. "Everyone agreed that we needed some fluff after last week. And he'll pull millions of stupids in."

Anita glared at him in the mirror. "I thought we were leaving the stupid to *Breakfast with the Blockheads*." She slithered into her slip. When she looked up again, he was off rousting the rest of the crime segment talent out of dreamspace.

The Leila Torn Show had known that killing her lead off would make for trouble with her talent as soon as Leila had suggested it. But over the five episode arc that had concluded last week, her ratings had shot back almost to where they had been in her glory days. She felt as powerful as she had ever been, ready to wrestle with the Allview for a slot higher up on the main menu, more cross promotion with other shows, better guest stars, and pricier audience giveaways. But these next few episodes were key. She had to hold her rediscovered audience after seventeen years of pratfalls and stabbings and all-expense-paid vacations to the moon.

Anita shrugged into the jacket of her pantsuit and slipped on her matte black flats. She turned away from the full-length mirror that she shared with Parthia Lukacz and looked over her shoulder at herself in the mirror. She tilted first one shoulder down and then the other, pursed her lips and thought pillow thoughts. She had been hoping to catch up with Slappy in dreamspace to ease his pain but she hadn't been able to find him, which was strange. He was the only one of the cast with a soul, in her opinion. Maybe they could steal a few private moments here in the studio. The possibility titillated her. She knew she wasn't supposed to do all that much in reality except be on the show. If she wanted to make her own decisions, she could choose in dreamspace. But dreamspace was so pale and the studio was so vivid. If she and Slappy. . .

The Leila Torn Show squashed that dangerous thought flat and sent Anita to check the new Leila.

The new Leila was the daughter of the old Leila's evil twin, Nia, who was introduced in Season Four. The old Leila had barely had time to have sex, much less give birth and raise children. She was too busy solving murders and contending with the devil for the souls of the guest stars. Her twin Nia, on the other hand, had enjoyed plenty of leisure when she wasn't corrupting mayors or managing her international crime cartel. Nia had shielded her daughter from that part of her life, however. In fact, the ceepees hadn't even realized that Nia had a daughter until Season Fifteen. At the climax of last week's episode, the old Leila had summoned the last of her strength to tell the new Leila of Nia's nefarious doings. And then she died of the slow acting poison that a mysterious someone had slipped her in an episode five weeks earlier. *The Leila Torn Show* had killed her lead talent off despite the biggest audience of the season, 87 percent of which had clicked a preference for the old Leila to save herself. In last week's fantasy segment, the devil had offered her a miracle cure in exchange for leaving the new Leila in her mother's malevolent clutches. This, of course, was something the old Leila could never do. *The Leila Torn Show* knew it was possibly foolhardy to go up against her audience like that, but that was the kind of show she was. People would either have to accept her or click on. And nobody but *The Leila Torn Show* would ever know how much it hurt to let her poor, brave Leila sacrifice herself for the good of the show.

Now she had to help the new Leila sell this plot twist to the hundred million customers of the Allview. *The Leila Torn Show* was by no means certain that she was up to the task, which is why she'd asked Anita to watch out for her.

The new Leila had inherited the old Leila's dressing room and had remade it to her own tastes. The old Leila liked hard surfaces that showed their years. There had been rust on the overhead beams and her Napoleon IV mirror had needed resilvering. This Leila was a fan of butterflies. The wallscape showed a tropical rainforest swarming with Longwings and Julias and Swallowtails and Blue Waves. The mirror was in the shape of a Gulf Fritillary and was lit by glowworms. Reflected in it was the face of the new lead of *The Leila Torn Show*. Her eyes were haunted and when she saw Anita her mouth puckered into a walnut. Anita was certain then that this episode was about to plunge off a cliff, but she was talent. It was her role here to underplay her feelings, show confidence in the new Leila that she didn't feel.

"Ready for your big debut?" she said brightly.

"There were supposed to be raisins," said Leila stiffly. "I specifically asked Herb for raisins."

Anita glanced at the bowl of Muscat raisins on the dressing table, dark as garnets. Leila followed her gaze and then with a screech of frustration swept the bowl onto the floor, shattering it.

"I said golden raisins!" She bounced on her chair twice. "I thought we spoke English on this show."

Anita took a breath. "We all get the jitters, Leila." Then another, longer breath. "I remember my first episode . . ."

"I didn't upload my part." She regarded herself with grim satisfaction in the butterfly mirror, as if she had just issued some kind of artistic manifesto.

Anita clamped her teeth together so hard she thought she might shatter a molar. *The good of the show*, she told herself. "Well then," she said carefully, "since there's no time for you to dip into dreamspace to catch yourself up, the whips will have to feed you lines through your earstone." Anita tried to imagine how a talent could turn into a stupid. "Don't worry, they do that all the time with last minute rewrites."

"I did it on purpose, you know. I'm going to give a cold reading." She emphasized *cold* and *reading* as if these were terms of art that Anita might not be familiar with. "That way whatever I say will sound like I just made it up."

"Like you just. . . ? But you're on in ten minutes with Turnabout," Anita was so taken aback that she spoke before she realized what she was saying. "He'll stick his tongue into your ear and then tuck you into his back pocket, if you don't know what you're doing."

"He wouldn't." Leila's eyes went wide. "He came to visit me yesterday in dreamspace. He seemed so nice. He brought me a puppy."

"Kent Turnabout?"

Leila spun away from the mirror to face Anita. "You all hate me because I'm not her." Then she melted into tears. "I can't do this. I'm not a talent. I was going to be a pet groomer." She picked up a brush imprinted

with the bright yellows of the Golden Angelwing butterfly. "I don't know anything about solving murders and I'm scared of the devil."

"Listen, Leila. You have to pull yourself together. We're all depending on you. You're the lead now."

"I don't want to be the lead!" She brushed her hair furiously. "I want raisins."

It was all Anita could do to keep from slapping her. If there was one thing that all the talent in the cast had yearned for over the years, it was to be spun off to a show of their own. Anita had conceived any number of elaborate sets for *Love, Anita* in dreamspace. Yet like everything else in dreamspace, it wasn't good enough. Dreamspace was her refuge, but she longed for the reality of *The Leila Torn Show* and the Allview. Now this brat was handed the coveted prize of a lead on a show and all she could think of was to push it away?

Anita could feel her fingernails stabbing her palm but her voice was steady. "What would your aunt say if she could hear you now?"

"She's dead. The show killed her."

"She offered to die so the rest of us could go on." She put a hand on Leila's hot, wet cheek and turned her head so that their eyes met. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course it does. I loved Leila, too." She shook herself free. "But why won't anybody listen to me? What if I can't be her?"

There was a knock at the door; Herb Katz cracked it open. "Fifteen minutes, Leila," he called, and then stuck his head in. He was neither surprised to find Anita in the room nor alarmed to see Leila in tears. "Are you two girls having a heart-to-heart?"

"We can't." Leila swiped at the corner of her eye. "We're one heart shy."

Anita and Herb exchanged glances. "You'll be fine, Leila." Herb touched a finger to his forehead. "Fifteen minutes."

The Leila Torn Show wasn't so sure. The way this episode was going so far, she wondered if she might have made a mistake. Had she betrayed herself just to eke out a few limp last episodes? How many shows survived the death of the lead? Watching Kent Turnabout chew up her talent in the comedy segment made her wish she had lured some hot second lead from another show to replace Leila. Or maybe a strong pitch might have enticed Margo Rain to become her lead, instead of just signing on for a guest shot. She would even have considered calling herself *The Margo Rain Show*. After all, what was in a name?

The Leila Torn Show was so depressed that she turned away from the studio for the first time ever while an episode was live. The whips could run the show without her. Leila would either score or she wouldn't. The cast would either rally or not. Her audience would either stay or click elsewhere. All she could do now was watch anyway, just like the millions of customers of the Allview. But *The Leila Torn Show* could not bear to look at how far she had fallen, so instead she ghosted back into her archives.

Critics maintained that her best seasons were the First and Second, the Eighth, when she first introduced the comic segment, and the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth, when Graves's inspired casting of Lucifer for the fantasy segment had vaulted them to the top of the Allview menu.

But *The Leila Torn Show's* favorite season was the Third, when she was a straight crime show and the plots were all fresh. The cast had been different then, full of ambition and wisecracks. Leila had been a P.I. going to law school at night. Slappy had been Slick, thirty pounds thinner, an ex-con turned P.I. who was sexy and funny and quick with his fists. He and Leila had had an affair in Season Two that Slick never really got over, but in Season Three, their banter suggested they might still get back together. In those days, Anita Bright was a cop on a mission to make detective and maybe leap to her own show; she had no use for Leila and wasn't afraid to let the world know it. Leila still had a roommate in Season Three: Meg Wordsworth, a reporter for *Watch This*, who had a knack of being in the right place at the right time, mostly because she was always tagging along with Leila on her cases. Tom Rocket had not yet left the law firm where Leila worked to go to outer space. And of course, back then Leila was in almost every scene; she *was* *The Leila Torn Show*.

But what always drew her back to Season Three was Leo No, Leila's criminal nemesis for ten different episodes. Although she had put several of his lieutenants behind bars—and two into the morgue—he always managed to skip free just when she thought she had him. He sent her a different playing card—all hearts, starting with the deuce—as a taunt at the conclusion of each of his Season Three episodes. *The Leila Torn Show* still didn't understand why Graves had refused to let Leila capture him and why the Leo No arc stopped at the jack of hearts. But then she didn't understand ceepees; what they did seemed equal parts mendacity and black magic. In the last episode of Season Three, Meg had reported that No had died in the terrorist nuking of Geneva; the cast believed that it was just a ceepee tease for Season Four. But then, in the second episode of that season, Meg had been kidnapped and held hostage until she was executed in the cliffhanger last episode. After that, the ceepees never got around to raising Leila's first archenemy from the dead.

Leila had come closest to Leo No in the jack of hearts episode, in which she was representing the wife of a psychiatrist played by the late Dame Hillary Winterberry. The payoff scene was set among the dressing rooms of a Midnight on Main menswear store, in which Leila had to go from stall to stall, searching for the killer. *The Leila Torn Show* knew it was dangerous to spend too much time looking at reruns, but in her dispirited state, she couldn't seem to help herself.

INT. STORE/SWINGING HALF DOORS

SLICK

(draws gun)

In there?

LEILA

Yes. But there isn't going to be any gunplay, loverboy. This is No's accountant, not his muscle.

SLICK

You willing to bet your life on that?

June 2006

LEILA

Why not? I like the odds. *(beat)* But if I lose you can keep my ashes under the bed.

(pushes through doors)

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR

LEILA

Lester?

(pulls aside first curtain)

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CUSTOMER IN BOXERS

CUSTOMER

No Lester in here, babe. But there's room for you.

LEILA

Sorry. I'm looking for my son. He's supposed to be trying on his prom tux.

(closes curtain)

(aside) Boxers. Not my type.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR

LEILA

Oh Lester, honey?

(pulls aside second curtain)

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/THE DEVIL IN SILK TOKAJER SUIT

THE DEVIL

Try two stalls down.

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

You! But you were never in this episode! *(beat)* Wait, *you* were Leo No?

THE DEVIL

Me? Too small a role. *(beat)* Besides, I hate being typecast.

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

How did you get into my archive? What is this?

THE DEVIL

(spreads his hands)

The usual. I'm here to offer you a proposition.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE LEILA TORN SHOW

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

No.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR/ANGLE

THE DEVIL

No? Not even interested in hearing the terms?

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

I'm not talent. I'm the show.

THE DEVIL

You think, you feel, you enjoy, and suffer. My, how you suffer. I believe we have a basis for a transaction. *(beat)* Just out of curiosity, how many more years would you want?

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

Years?

THE DEVIL

If this new lead doesn't work out, you've probably got less than a handful of episodes left before the Allview shuts you down.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE LEILA TORN SHOW

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

You can give me years?

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE DEVIL

THE DEVIL

Years.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/ANGLE

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

This is a joke the ceepees are playing on me. You can't make something like that happen. You're just talent.

THE DEVIL

No, *Lucifer* is just talent. I'm the devil, sister, the real deal. I'm offering you years because when I get you, I get the rest of the cast all at once. I'm tired of collecting your people piecemeal. I can extend myself for a package deal.

INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/NEW ANGLE

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

My people?

THE DEVIL

Ever wonder how Graves got to be head ceepee? Why Jay is written into every segment?

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

I don't believe you've been talking to my talent. I'd know about it.

THE DEVIL

Why? You're not God. You're just a show. (*beat*) Care to deal?

THE LEILA TORN SHOW

(*backing away*)

No. Get away from me.

THE DEVIL

That's what they all say—at first. Tell you what . . . I'll start things rolling in your direction and then come back in a while for your final answer. Meanwhile, if you don't mind. . . .

(*pulls curtain closed*)

"Has anyone seen Slappy?" Herb Katz slipped into the Green Room. Anita Bright, Parthia Lukacz, and J. Timson Traylor glanced up from their game of Hearts. "I checked everywhere: backstage, his closet, make-up, the john, the ceepee's den. He missed the ten minute call and now he's about to miss his cue."

"Well, he hasn't been with us," said Parthia, the assistant D. A. who Leila regularly skunked in court. "If we had a fourth, we could play bridge."

"Something's wrong," said Anita, coming out of her chair.

Traylor put his hand on her arm. "And you're not the one to put it right." He tugged her back onto her seat. "We're playing a hand here."

The Leila Torn Show could see that Traylor was trying to shoot the moon. If he could lull Parthia into dumping her queen of spades onto his king, he'd have it.

"He's right, Anita," said Herb. "You stay put or you'll miss your cue."

"Besides," continued Traylor, "Turnabout will skip right past Slappy's lines if he gets the chance. All Slappy has tonight is a weather report."

"Bastard Turnabout is making this episode up as he goes," grumbled Parthia. She put her hand on the queen of spades, jiggled it thoughtfully, and then pulled the ten instead. "And Leila, our new leading doormat, is letting him walk all over her."

"Can you believe he had the balls to steal some of her lines before she could spit them out?" said Traylor.

"Maybe he'll start questioning witnesses once we go to trial." Parthia raised her hand and spoke in her most outraged courtroom bark. "Your honor, I object. Counsel for the defense is irrelevant, immaterial, and catatonic."

Traylor chuckled. Anita opened her mouth to suggest that Herb check

for Slappy outside the stage door that opened onto Tomcat Alley, but Herb Katz had already vanished. Sometimes it seemed to her as though the whips had the ability to pass through walls.

The Leila Torn Show was disturbed by Slappy's disappearance. She began a quick inventory of the building but couldn't see him anywhere. He must have left, as impossible as that seemed. It only confirmed what the devil had said to her, that her cast, her whips, her band, even her ceepees could keep secrets from her. Free will was fine in dreamspace but it had no place in the studio.

"Torn?" said the Allview's show-to-show messaging system. It overrode all *The Leila Torn Show's* other inputs; she could no more ignore it than she could a lightning strike. "Rocket here."

Rocket Law was where Tom Rocket had finally landed after the Allview had lifted him from her at the end of Season Five. Tom had guested everywhere while the Allview developed a show for him. *Rocket Law* followed the adventures of a ragtag limited partnership of defense attorneys who flitted around the galaxy in their starship *Queen of Hearts* righting wrongs, bending alien statutes, and having affairs. While it had never quite reached the top of the Allview menu, it was a solid second tier show, which consistently delivered a high attention quotient.

"Rocket, I'm live right now," said *The Leila Torn Show*. "Can this wait?"

"And I'm watching you right now," said *Rocket Law*. "The episode is a bust."

The Leila Torn Show bit back her anger. "It's just Turnabout." When had she ever called *Rocket Law* to criticize his stupid lawyer tricks? "He's too big for the part."

"No, it's your lead, Torn. You dropped a mouse in the lion's den."

"Since when did you grow your critic's horns?"

"Since never. I'm talking numbers, not art."

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The Leila Torn Show had been afraid to check, but there was no getting around it now that she had been directly challenged by another show. According to the instants, she'd been hemorrhaging ratings at about a point a minute ever since Leila had made her first appearance.

"I'm busy, Rocket," she said. "Skip to the payoff."

"I'll take this new Leila off your hands. My ceepees have come up with a great multi-episode plot line. Do you know who her father is?"

The Leila Torn Show consulted Graves and the other ceepees. "No. Nia never revealed who the father was."

"Well, Tom Rocket tells me that it's probably him. So now my ceepees are saying we should bring her aboard the *Queen of Hearts*. The Delalo are trying to get back at Tom for breaking the Molybdenum Treaty and we're having it that they've implanted a personality worm in Leila, which explains why she's such a stiff. I'm offering a crossover plot for the next two episodes. My ceepees get veto power over yours—I don't do boob jokes on my show. After that, Leila joins my cast and I'll send Miriel Six over to you. She wants to settle down and have her puppies."

Miriel Six was only *Rocket Law's* third female lead, but she was one of the sexiest dogs on the Allview.

"Miriel Six isn't a lead."

"Neither is the mouse you've got now. You're the show so it's your call, but you could go with guest leads until you find your girl. Or give that Anita Bright her shot; she's waited long enough."

"You're right, Rocket. I *am* the show."

"Don't get all huffy. And another thing, Tom asked if you wanted to send Slick O'Toole over too. I'll throw in some cross-promo. Have one of your talent give him a shout every few episodes, get him up to speed with what's happening back on Earth."

"You want *Slappy*?"

"Apparently he and Tommy were pals in your dreamspace. Anyway, think it over. We can talk again. By the way, you're down another three points." He clicked off.

As soon as *Rocket Law* released his hold on her head, the sounds and sights of the studio swarmed in once again on *The Leila Torn Show*. For better or worse, the episode was almost over. Lucifer was working the studio audience, looking to give away an American Cookhouse complete kitchen makeover just before the commercial break leading into the denouement. "Is there a Miss Angelina Bandoli in the house?" he called. "Angelina Bandoli?" *The Leila Torn Show* read him down to his neurons and confirmed that he was nothing but talent.

A petite silver-haired woman in a housedress decorated with blue daisies levitated out of her seat with a squeal of joy.

"I hear you, mother." Lucifer charged up the aisle, holding the microphone in front of him like a knight with his lance. "Angelina, Angelina? Isn't that Italian for *angel*? Not sure I can do business with your kind."

The studio audience groaned in frustration.

Lucifer shook his head good-naturedly to reassure them he was just kidding. Once he called out a name, everyone knew it was a done deal. "So mother, it says here you've had a bad year." He thrust the mike at

her and she rattled off a sad and slightly incoherent tale of hip replacement, multiple power failures, dead clownfish, and a stove fire. There were only forty-five seconds left before the commercial when he interrupted her.

"I'm satisfied." He turned to the camera and addressed the customers at home. "Are you satisfied?"

The studio audience replied as one. "We're *satisfied*."

Lucifer turned back to Angelina Bandoli. "So mother, you're prepared to make a deal with the devil for state-of-the-art kitchen appliances from the American Cookhouse collection?"

Angelina glanced down at her empty seat, shy as a ten-year-old anticipating her first kiss.

Lucifer put an arm around her shoulder and leered into the camera. "And what are you willing to trade for this fabulous prize?"

"Stop!" The voice exploded from the wings, stage left. The curtain shivered and Slappy O'Toole stepped into the lights, a gun in his hand and a wildness in his eyes that *The Leila Torn Show* hadn't seen in years. "Stop this now."

Backstage, Herb Katz murmured, "Hold the commercial until I say."

"This is all wrong," said Slappy, trudging downstage toward the audience, the gun dangling like an afterthought. "Wrong, wrong, wrong." He called out to Lucifer. "We can't go on like this. We've ruined this show, all of us. Made it a joke."

The stage right curtains billowed and Kent Turnabout skipped onto the stage. *The Leila Torn Show* couldn't read her guest star as well as she could read Slappy but she knew if there were improvising going on, Turnabout would try to be part of it.

"That's right!" Turnabout danced around Slappy twice and then put an arm on his shoulder. "It's all a big joke now." His voice bounced mightily off the last row of the house. "I watched Leila when I was just a kid. I used to cheer when she caught the killer." He pointed at the people in the front row. "You good folks did too, right?" The audience murmured, uncertain whether they were in the comedy or the crime segment of the show. "In the old days there was justice," he said. "Now there are dishwashers."

Slappy shook Kent Turnabout off and pointed the gun at him. "You're what's wrong with this show, asshole."

The studio audience gasped.

The Leila Torn Show hadn't seen that gun since Season Seven, when Slick's wife had been murdered. When Slick had become Slappy. Now, ten years later, his arm trembled under its weight. "Leila never would have let the likes of you on when she was alive."

"Poor old Slippy." Turnabout stepped three paces back, made a gun of his thumb and forefinger and aimed at him. "Maybe you're what's wrong with this show. You're not funny anymore. That's why Leila put you on the shelf." He went up on tiptoes to place an imaginary Slappy on the highest shelf he could reach, making a noise like a slide whistle.

The Leila Torn Show guessed that stupids all over the world were peeing their pants with laughter.

Slappy considered, then nodded. "You're right," he said and put the gun to his temple. "I am just about done."

The house went quiet. Then a woman, maybe Angelina Bandoli, started to weep. Everyone was watching Slappy.

Except for Kent Turnabout, who was not about to be upstaged by a sad, fat, old ex-P. I. "You may be done, Mr. Sloppy," he called brightly, "but I'm not." He bounded across the stage like a deer on fire, snatched the gun from Slappy and put it to his own head.

"He thinks it's just a prop," Herb Katz's voice rang in every earstone. "Please god, somebody tell him that thing might be loaded."

The studio audience was just beginning to clap when he pulled the trigger. The gun fired with a roar like hell cracking open.

"Curtain!" shouted Herb Katz. "Lower the goddamn curtain."

But it was Chill Jensen who saved the day. The band leader called out "Star-Spangled Banner," tapped his baton and as soon as the band began to play the studio audience stood and sang along. The house was a little shaky but the customers at home couldn't smell the cordite or see the finger of blood poking from beneath the curtain. After they finished with the national anthem, Chill called for *The Leila Torn Show* theme song. The house lights came up and the audience stood and shuffled out, muttering in confusion.

The ceepees boiled out of their den to see the corpse for themselves. The band left their instruments on the bandstand and joined the cast which lingered in the wings, waiting for *The Leila Torn Show* to do something, say anything. But she was speechless in the shock of the moment. She kept telling herself that what had happened had nothing to do with her. It was the devil's work. She had asked for none of it.

Then the cops from *Protect and Defend* showed up, and sent everyone back to their dressing rooms and offices. Anita led Slappy back to the Green Room and sat with him there, holding his hand. To distract him, she put on one of his favorite episodes from Season Two, the one where he found the sailboat in the swimming pool. Many of the talent jumped straight into dreamspace while they waited to give their statements, momentarily safe from the rough and tumble of reality. Meanwhile, the cops went about their jobs with grim efficiency, although clearly *Protect and Defend* was jubilant at the chance to crossover into what promised to be a ratings bonanza.

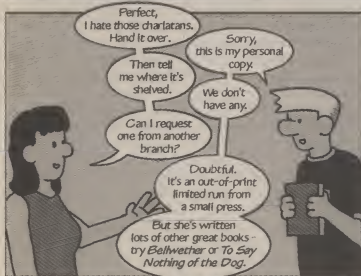
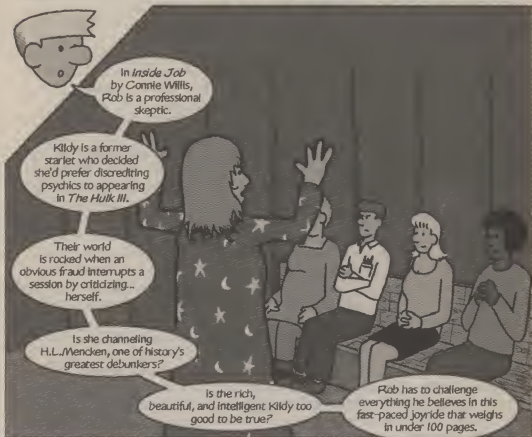
Finally Graves shook *The Leila Torn Show* out of her lethargy. "We've got messages," he said. "Hundreds of them."

The Leila Torn Show scanned them quickly, and then left all but one for her ceepees to handle.

"I loved it," breathed Margo Rain. "Every minute of it. I've never seen a show blow itself up like that. And two weeks in a row. You're so brave. I'm very excited now to be on next week. You do have something special for me, no? Whatever you want, I'm yours."

The Leila Torn Show considered. In her heart, she believed that she hadn't agreed to anything. And she had to think of the good of the show.

"I have a proposition for you, Margo," she said. ○



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Jack Skillingstead's newest story for us offers us a nearly perfect day for exploring . . .

LIFE ON THE PRESERVATION

Jack Skillingstead

Wind buffeted the scutter. Kylie resisted the temptation to fight the controls. Hand light on the joystick, she veered toward the green smolder of Seattle, riding down a cloud canyon aflicker with electric bursts. The Preservation Field extended half a mile over Elliot Bay but did not capture Blake or Vashon Island nor any of the blasted lands.

She dropped to the deck. Acid rain and wind lashed the scutter. The Preservation Field loomed like an immense wall of green jellied glass.

She punched through, and the sudden light shift dazzled her. Kylie polarized the thumbnail port, at the same time deploying braking vanes and dipping steeply to skim the surface of the bay.

The skyline and waterfront were just as they'd appeared in the old photographs and movies. By the angle of the sun she estimated her arrival time at late morning. Not bad. She reduced airspeed and gently pitched forward. The scutter drove under the water. It got dark. She cleared the thumbnail port. Bubbles trailed back over the thick plexi, strings of silver pearls.

Relying on preset coordinates, she allowed the autopilot to navigate. In minutes the scutter was tucked in close to a disused pier. Kyle opened the ballast, and the scutter surfaced in a shadow, bobbing. She saw a ladder and nudged forward.

She was sweating inside her costume. Jeans, black sneakers, olive drab shirt, rain parka. Early twenty-first century urban America: Seattle chic.

She powered down, tracked her seat back, popped the hatch. The air was sharp and clean, with a saltwater tang. Autumn chill in the Pacific Northwest. Water slopped against the pilings.

She climbed up the pitchy, guano-spattered rungs of the ladder.

And stood in awe of the intact city, the untroubled sky. She could sense the thousands of living human beings, their vitality like an electric vibe in her blood. Kylie was nineteen and had never witnessed such a day. It had been this way before the world ended. She reminded herself that she was here to destroy it.

From her pocket she withdrew a remote control, pointed it at the scutter. The hatch slid shut and her vehicle sank from view. She replaced the remote control. Her hand strayed down to another zippered pocket and she felt the outline of the explosive sphere. Behind it, her heart was beating wildly. *I'm here*, she thought.

She walked along the waterfront, all her senses exploited. The sheer numbers of people overwhelmed her. The world had ended on a Saturday, November nine, 2004. There were more living human beings in her immediate range of sight than Kylie had seen in her entire life.

She extracted the locator device from her coat pocket and flipped up the lid. It resembled a cellular phone of the period. A strong signal registered immediately. Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, she turned slowly toward the high reflective towers of the city, letting people go around her, so many people, walking, skateboarding, jogging, couples and families and single people, flowing in both directions, and seagulls gliding overhead, and horses harnessed to carriages waiting at the curb (so *much* life), and the odors and rich living scents, and hundreds of cars and pervasive human noise and riot, all of it continuous and—

"Are you all right?"

She started. A tall young man in a black jacket loomed over her. The jacket was made out of *leather*. She could smell it.

"Sorry," he said. "You looked sort of dazed."

Kylie turned away and walked into the street, toward the signal, her mission. Horns blared, she jerked back, dropped her locator. It skittered against the curb near one of the carriage horses. Kylie lunged for it, startling the horse, which clopped back, a hoof coming down on the locator. *No!* She couldn't get close. The great head of the animal tossed, nostrils snorting, the driver shouting at her, Kylie frantic to reach her device.

"Hey, watch it!"

It was the man in the leather jacket. He pulled her back, then darted in himself and retrieved the device. He looked at it a moment, brow knitting. She snatched it out of his hand. The display was cracked and blank. She shook it, punched the keypad. Nothing.

"I'm really sorry," the man said.

She ignored him.

"It's like my fault," he said.

She looked up. "You have no idea, *no idea* how bad this is."

He winced.

"I don't even have any tools," she said, not to him.

"Let me—"

She walked away, but not into the street, the locator a useless thing in her hand. She wasn't a tech. Flying the scutter and planting explosives was as technical as she got. So it was plan B, only since plan B didn't exist it was plan Zero. Without the locator she couldn't possibly find the Eternity Core. A horse! Jesus.

"*Shit.*"

She sat on a stone bench near a decorative waterfall that unrolled and shone like a sheet of plastic. Her mind raced but she couldn't formulate a workable plan B.

A shadow moved over her legs. She looked up, squinting in the sun.

"Hi."

"What do you want?" she said to the tall man in the leather jacket.

"I thought an ice cream might cheer you up."

"Huh?"

"Ice cream," he said. "You know, 'You scream, I scream, we all scream for ice cream?'"

She stared at him. His skin was pale, his eyebrows looked sketched on with charcoal, and there was a small white scar on his nose. He was holding two waffle cones, one in each hand, the cones packed with pink ice cream. She had noticed people walking around with these things, had seen the sign.

"I guess you don't like strawberry," he said.

"I've never had it."

"Yeah, right."

"Okay, I'm lying. Now why don't you go away. I need to think."

He extended his left hand. "It's worth trying, at least once. Even on a cold day."

Kylie knew about ice cream. People in the old movies ate it. It made them happy.

She took the cone.

"Listen, can I sit down for a second?" the man said.

She ignored him, turning the cone in her hand like the mysterious artifact it was. The man sat down anyway.

"My name's Toby," he said.

"It's really pink," Kylie said.

"Yeah." And after a minute, "You're supposed to lick it."

She looked at him.

"Like this," he said, licking his own cone.

"I *know*," she said. "I'm not an ignoramus." Kylie licked her ice cream. *Jesus!* Her whole body lit up. "That's—"

"Yeah?"

"It's wonderful," she said.

"You really haven't had ice cream before?"

She shook her head, licking away at the cone, devouring half of it in seconds.

"That's incredibly far-fetched," Toby said. "What's your name? You want a napkin?" He pointed at her chin.

"I'm Kylie," she said, taking the napkin and wiping her chin and lips. All of a sudden she didn't want any more ice cream. She had never eaten anything so rich. In her world there *wasn't* anything so rich. Her stomach felt queasy.

"I have to go," she said.

She stood up, so did he.

"Hey, you know the thing is, what you said about not having tools? What I mean is, I have tools. I mean I fix things. It's not a big deal, but I'm good and I like doing it. I can fix all kinds of things, you know? Palm Pilots, cellphones, laptops. Whatever."

Kylie waved the locator. "You don't even know what this *is*."

"I don't *have* to know what it is to make it go again."

Hesitantly, she handed him the locator. While he was turning it in his fingers, she spotted the Tourist. He was wearing a puffy black coat and a watch cap, and he was walking directly towards her, expressionless, his left hand out of sight inside his pocket. He wasn't a human being.

Toby noticed her changed expression and followed her gaze.

"You know that guy?"

Kylie ran. She didn't look back to see if the Tourist was running after her. She cut through the people crowding the sidewalk, her heart slamming. It was a minute before she realized she'd left the locator with Toby. That almost made her stop, but it was too late. Let him keep the damn thing.

She ran hard. The Old Men had chosen her for this mission because of her youth and vitality (so many were sickly and weak), but after a while she had to stop and catch her breath. She looked around. The vista of blue water was dazzling. The city was awesome, madly perfect, phantasmagoric, better than the movies. The Old Men called it an abomination. Kylie didn't care what they said. She was here for her mother, who was dying and who grieved for the trapped souls.

Kylie turned slowly around, and here came two more Tourists.

No, three.

Three from three different directions, one of them crossing the street, halting traffic. Stalking toward her with no pretense of human expression, as obvious to her among the authentic populace as cockroaches in a scatter of white rice.

Kylie girded herself. Before she could move, a car drew up directly in front of her, a funny round car painted canary yellow. The driver threw the passenger door open, and there was the man again, Toby.

"Get in!"

She ducked into the car, which somehow reminded her of the scutter, and it accelerated away. A Tourist who had scrambled for the door handle spun back and fell. Kylie leaned over the seat. The Tourist got up, the other two standing beside him, not helping. Then Toby cranked the car into a turn that threw her against the door. They were climbing a steep hill, and Toby seemed to be doing too many things at once, working the clutch, the steering wheel, and radio, scanning through stations until he lighted upon something loud and incomprehensible that made him smile and nod his head.

"You better put on your seatbelt," he said. "They'll ticket you for that shit, believe it or not."

Kylie buckled her belt.

"Thanks," she said. "You came out of nowhere."

"Anything can happen. Who were those guys?"

"Tourists."

"Okay. Hey, you know what?"

"What?"

He took his hand off the shifter and pulled Kylie's locator out of his inside jacket pocket.

"I bet you I can fix this gizmo."

"Would you bet your soul on it?"

"Why not?" He grinned.

He stopped at his apartment to pick up his tools, and Kylie waited in the car. There was a clock on the dashboard. 11:45 A.M. She set the timer on her wrist chronometer.

Twelve hours and change.

They sat in a coffee bar in Belltown. More incomprehensible music thumped from box speakers bracketed near the ceiling. Paintings by some local artist decorated the walls, violent slashes of color, faces of dogs and men and women drowning, mouths gaping.

Kylie kept an eye open for Tourists.

Toby hunched over her locator, a jeweler's kit unrolled next to his espresso. He had the back off the device and was examining its exotic components with the aid of a magnifying lens and a battery operated light of high intensity. He had removed his jacket and was wearing a black sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up. His forearms were hairy. A tattoo of blue thorns braceleted his right wrist. He was quiet for a considerable time, his attention focused. Kylie drank her second espresso, like the queen of the world, like it was nothing to just *ask* for coffee this good and get it.

"Well?" she said.

"Ah."

"What?"

"Ah, what *is* this thing?"

"You said you didn't need to know."

"I don't need to know, I just want to know. After all, according to you, I'm betting my immortal soul that I can fix it, so it'd be nice to know what it does."

"We don't always get to know the nice things, do we?" Kylie said. "Besides, I don't believe in souls. That was just something to say." Something her mother had told her, she thought. The Old Men didn't talk about souls. They talked about zoos.

"You sure downed that coffee fast. You want to go for three?"

"Yeah."

He chuckled and gave her a couple of dollars and she went to the bar and got another espresso, head buzzing in a very good way.

"It's a locator," she said, taking pity on him, after returning to the table and sitting down.

"Yeah? What's it locate?"

"The city's Eternity Core."

"Oh, that explains everything. What's an eternity core?"

"It's an alien machine that generates an energy field around the city and preserves it in a sixteen hour time loop."

"Gotcha."

"Now can you fix it?"

"Just point out one thing."

She slurped up her third espresso. "Okay."

"What's the power source? I don't see anything that even vaguely resembles a battery."

She leaned in close, their foreheads practically touching. She pointed with the chipped nail of her pinky finger.

"I think it's that coily thing," she said.

He grunted. She didn't draw back. She was smelling him, smelling his skin. He lifted his gaze from the guts of the locator. His eyes were pale blue, the irises circled with black rings.

"You're kind of a spooky chick," he said.

"Kind of."

"I like spooky."

"Where I come from," Kylie said, "almost all the men are impotent."

"Yeah?"

She nodded.

"Where do you come from," he asked, "the east side?"

"East side of hell."

"Sounds like it," he said.

She kissed him, impulsively, her blood singing with caffeine and long-unrequited pheromones. Then she sat back and wiped her lips with her palm and stared hard at him.

"I wish you hadn't done that," she said.

"Me."

"Just fix the locator, okay?"

"Spooky," he said, picking up a screwdriver with a blade not much bigger than a spider's leg.

A little while later she came back from the bathroom and he had put the locator together and was puzzling over the touchpad. He had found the power button. The two inch square display glowed the blue of cold starlight. She slipped it from his hand and activated the grid. A pinhead hotspot immediately began blinking.

"It work okay?" Toby asked.

"Yes." She hesitated, then said, "Let's go for a drive. I'll navigate."

They did that.

Kylie liked the little, round canary car. It felt luxurious and utilitarian at the same time. Letting the locator guide her, she directed Toby. After many false turns and an accumulated two point six miles on the odometer, she said:

"Stop. No, keep going, but not too fast."

The car juddered as he manipulated clutch, brake, and accelerator. They rolled past a closed store front on the street level of a four story building on First Avenue, some kind of sex shop, the plate glass soaped and brown butcher paper tacked up on the inside.

Two men in cheap business suits loitered in front of the building. Tourists.

Kylie scrunched down in her seat.

"Don't look at those guys," she said. "Just keep driving."

"Whatever."

Later on they were parked under the monorail tracks eating submarine sandwiches. Kylie couldn't get over how great everything was, the food, the coffee, the damn *air*. All of it the way things used to be. She could hardly believe how great it had been, how much had been lost.

"Okay," she said, kind of talking to herself, "so they know I'm here and they're guarding the Core."

"Those bastards," Toby said.

"You wouldn't think it was so funny if you knew what they really were."

"They looked like used car salesmen."

"They're Tourists," Kylie said.

"Oh my God! More tourists!"

Kylie chewed a mouthful of sub. She'd taken too big a bite. Every flavor was like a drug. Onions, provolone, turkey, mustard, pepper.

"So where are the evil tourists from?" Toby asked. "California?"

"Another dimensional reality."

"That's what I said."

Kylie's chronometer toned softly. Ten hours.

Inside the yellow car there were many smells and one of them was Toby.

"Do you have any more tattoos?" she asked.

"One. It's—"

"Don't tell me," she said.

"Okay."

"I want you to show me. But not here. At the place where you live."

"You want to come to my apartment?"

"Your apartment, yes."

"Okay, spooky." He grinned. So did she.

Some precious time later the chronometer toned again. It wasn't on her wrist anymore. It was on the hardwood floor tangled up in her clothes.

Toby, who was standing naked by the refrigerator holding a bottle of grape juice, said, "Why's your watch keep doing that?"

"It's a countdown," Kylie said, looking at him.

"A countdown to what?"

"To the end of the current cycle. The end of the loop."

He drank from the bottle, his throat working. She liked to watch him now, whatever he did. He finished drinking and screwed the cap back on.

"The loop," he said, shaking his head.

When he turned to put the bottle back in the refrigerator she saw his other tattoo again: a cross throwing off light. It was inked into the skin on his left shoulder blade.

"You can't even see your own cross," she said.

He came back to the bed.

"I don't have to see it," he said. "I just like to know it's there, watching my back."

"Are you Catholic?"

"No."

"My mother is."

"I just like the idea of Jesus," he said.

"You're spookier than I am," Kylie said.

"Not by a mile."

She kissed his mouth, but when he tried to caress her she pushed him gently back.

"Take me someplace."

"Where?"

"My grandparents' house." She meant "great" grandparents, but didn't feel like explaining to him how so many decades had passed outside the loop of the Preservation.

"Right now?"

"Yes."

It was a white frame house on Queen Anne Hill, sitting comfortably among its prosperous neighbors on a street lined with live oaks. Kylie pressed her nose to the window on the passenger side of the Vee Dub, as Toby called his vehicle.

"Stop," she said. "That's it."

He tucked the little car into the curb and turned the engine off. Kylie looked from the faded photo in her hand to the house. Her mother's mother had taken the photo just weeks before the world ended. In it, Kylie's great grandparents stood on the front porch of the house, their arms around each other, waving and smiling. There was no one standing on the front porch now.

"It's real," Kylie said. "I've been looking at this picture my whole life."

"Haven't you ever been here before?"

She shook her head. At the same time her chronometer toned.

"How we doing on the countdown?" Toby asked.

She glanced at the digital display.

"Eight hours."

"So what happens at midnight?"

"It starts up again. The end is the beginning."

He laughed. She didn't.

"So then it's Sunday, right? Then do you countdown to Monday?"

"At the end of the loop it's *not* Sunday," she said. "It's the same day over again."

"Two Saturdays. Not a bad deal."

"Not just two. It goes on and on. November ninth a thousand, ten thousand, a million times over."

"Okay."

"You can look at me like that if you want. I don't care if you believe me. You know something, Toby?"

"What?"

"I'm having a really *good* day."

"That's November ninth for you."

She smiled at him, then kissed him, that feeling, the taste, all of the sensation in its totality.

"I want to see my grandparents now."

She opened the door and got out but he stayed in the car. She crossed the lawn, strewn with big colorful oak leaves, to the front door of the house, stealing backward glances, wanting to know he was still there waiting for her in the yellow car. Her lover. Her boyfriend.

She started to knock on the door but hesitated. From inside the big house she heard muffled music and laughter. She looked around. In the breeze an orange oak leaf detached from the tree and spun down. The sky blew clear and cold. Later it would cloud over and rain. Kylie knew all

about this day. She had been told of it since she was a small child. The last day of the world, perfectly preserved for the edification of alien Tourists and anthropologists. Some people said what happened was an accident, a consequence of the aliens opening the rift, disrupting the fabric of reality. What really pissed everybody off, Kylie thought, was the dismissive attitude. There was no occupying army, no invasion. They came, destroyed everything either intentionally or accidentally, then ignored the survivors. The Preservation was the only thing about the former masters of the Earth that interested them.

Kylie didn't care about all that right now. She had been told about the day, but she had never understood what the day meant, the sheer sensorial joy of it, the incredible beauty and rightness of it. A surge of pure delight moved through her being, and for a moment she experienced uncontrollable happiness.

She knocked on the door.

"Yes?" A woman in her mid-fifties with vivid green eyes, her face pressed with comfortable laugh lines. Like the house, she was a picture come to life. (Kylie's grandmother showing her the photographs, faded and worn from too much touching.)

"Hi," Kylie said.

"Can I help you?" the live photograph said.

"No. I mean, I wanted to ask you something."

The waiting expression on her face so familiar. Kylie said, "I just wanted to know, are you having a good day, I mean a really good day?"

Slight turn of the head, lips pursed uncertainly, ready to believe this was a harmless question from a harmless person.

"It's like a survey," Kylie said. "For school?"

A man of about sixty years wearing a baggy wool sweater and glasses came to the door.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"A happiness survey," Kylie's great grandmother said, and laughed.

"Happiness survey, huh?" He casually put his arm around his wife and pulled her companionably against him.

"Yes," Kylie said. "For school."

"Well, I'm happy as a clam," Kylie's great grandfather said.

"I'm a clam, too," Kylie's great grandmother said. "A happy one."

"Thank you," Kylie said.

"You're very welcome. Gosh, but you look familiar."

"So do you. Goodbye."

Back in the car Kylie squeezed Toby's hand. There had been a boy on the Outskirts. He was impotent, but he liked to touch Kylie and be with her, and he didn't mind watching her movies, the ones that made the Old Men sad and angry but that she obsessively hoarded images from in her mind. The boy's hand always felt cold and bony. Which wasn't his fault. The nicest time they ever had was a night they had spent in one of the ruins with a working fireplace and enough furniture to burn for several hours. They'd had a book of poems and took turns reading them to each other. Most of the poems didn't make sense to Kylie but she liked the sounds of the words, the way they were put together. Outside, the perpet-

ual storms crashed and sizzled, violet flashes stuttering into the cozy room with the fire.

In the yellow car, Toby's hand felt warm. Companionable and intimate.

"So how are they doing?" he said.

"They're happy."

"Great. What's next?"

"If you knew this was your last day to live," Kylie asked him, "what would you do?"

"I'd find a spooky girl and make love to her."

She kissed him. "What else?"

"Ah—"

"I mean without leaving the city. You can't leave the city."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd just get stuck in the Preservation Field until the loop re-started. It looks like people are driving out but they're not."

He looked at her closely, searching for the joke, then grinned. "We wouldn't want that to happen to us."

"No."

"So what would *you* do on your last day?" he asked.

"I'd find a spooky guy who could fix things and I'd get him to fix me up."

"You don't need fixing. You're not broken."

"I am."

"Yeah?"

"Let's drive around. Then let's have a really great meal, like the best food you can think of."

"That's doable."

"Then we can go back to your apartment."

"What about the big countdown?"

"Fuck the countdown." Kylie pushed the timing stud into her chronometer. "There," she said. "No more countdown."

"You like pizza?" Toby said.

"I don't know. What is it?"

After they made love the second time, Kylie fell into a light doze on Toby's futon bed. She was not used to so much rich stimulation, so much food and drink, so much touching.

She woke with a start from a dream that instantly disappeared from her consciousness. There was the sound of rain, but it wasn't the terrible poisonous rain of her world. Street light through the window cast a flowing shadow across the foot of the bed. It reminded her of the shiny fountain at the waterfront. The room was snug and comforting and safe. There was a clock on the table beside the bed but she didn't look at it. It could end right now.

She sat up. Toby was at his desk under a framed movie poster, bent over something illuminated by a very bright and tightly directed light. He was wearing his jeans but no shirt or socks.

Hello," she said.

He turned sharply, then smiled. "Oh, hey Kylie. Have a nice rest?"

"I'm thirsty."

He got up and fetched her a half-depleted bottle of water from the re-

frigerator. While he was doing that she noticed her locator in pieces on the desk.

"We don't need that anymore," she said, pointing.

"I was just curious. I can put it back together, no problem."

"I don't care about it." She lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

"Kylie?"

"Hmmm?" She kept her eyes closed.

"Who are you? Really."

"I'm your spooky girl."

"Besides that."

She opened her eyes. "Don't spoil it. Please don't."

"Spoil what?"

"This. Us. Now. It's all that matters."

Rain ticked against the window. It would continue all night, a long, cleansing rain. Water that anybody could catch in a cup and drink if they wanted to—water out of the sky.

Toby took his pants down and slipped under the sheet next to her, his body heat like a magnetic field that drew her against him. She pressed her cheek to his chest. His heart beat calmly.

"Everything's perfect," she said.

"Yeah." He didn't sound that certain.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said. "Only—this is all pretty fast. Don't you think we should know more about each other?"

"Why? Now is what matters."

"Yeah, but I mean, what do you do? Where do you live? Basic stuff. Big stuff, too, like do you believe in God or who'd you vote for for president?"

"I want to go for a long walk in the rain. I want to feel it on my face and not be afraid or sick."

"What do you mean?"

"You're spoiling it. Please, let's make every second happy. Make it a day we'd want to relive a thousand times."

"I don't want to live *any* day a thousand times."

"Let's walk now."

"What's the hurry?"

She got out of bed and started dressing, her back to him.

"Don't be mad," he said.

"I'm not mad."

"You are."

She turned to him, buttoning her shirt. "Don't tell me what I am."

"Sorry."

"You practically sleepwalk through the most important day of your life."

"I'm not sleepwalking."

"Don't you even want to fall in love with me?"

He laughed uncertainly. "I don't even know your name."

"You know it, Kylie."

"I mean your last name."

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," Toby said. "You matter to me."

Finished with her shirt, she sat on the edge of the bed to lace her shoes. "No you don't," she said. "You only care about me if you can know all about my past and our future. You can't live one day well and be happy."

"Now you sound like Hemingway."

"I don't know what that means and I don't care." She shrugged into her parka.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk. I *told* you what I wanted."

"Yeah, I guess I was too ignorant to absorb it."

She slammed the door on her way out.

She stood under the pumpkin-colored light of the street lamp, confused, face tilted up to be anointed by the rain. Was he watching her from the apartment window, his heart about to break? She waited and waited. This is the part where he would run to her and embrace her and kiss her and tell her that he loved, loved, loved her.

He didn't come out.

She stared at the brick building checkered with light and dark apartment windows, not certain which one was his.

He didn't come out, and it was spoiled.

A bus rumbled between her and the building, pale indifferent faces inside.

Kylie walked in the rain. It was not poison but it was cold and, after a while, unpleasant. She pulled her hood up and walked with her head down. The wet sidewalk was a palette of neon smears. Her fingers touched the shape of the explosive in her pocket. She could find the building with the papered windows. Even if the Tourists tried to stop her she might still get inside and destroy the Eternity Core. It's what her mother wanted, what the Old Men wanted. But what if they caught her? If she remained in the loop through an entire cycle she would become a permanent part of it. She couldn't stand that, not the way she hurt right now. She didn't know what time it was. She didn't know the *time*. She had to reach her scutter and get out.

A horn went off practically at her elbow. Startled, she looked up. A low and wide vehicle, a boy leaning out the passenger window, smirking.

"Hey, you wanna go for a ride?"

"No."

"Then fuck you, bitch!" He cackled, and the vehicle accelerated away, ripping the air into jagged splinters.

She walked faster. The streets were confusing. She was lost. Her panic intensified. Why couldn't he have come after her and be sorry and love her? But it wasn't like the best parts of the movies. Some of it was good, but a lot of it wasn't. Maybe her mother had been right. But Kylie didn't believe in souls, so wasn't it better to have one day forever than no days? Wasn't it?

Fuck you, bitch.

She turned around and ran back in the direction from which she'd come. At first she didn't think she could find it, but there it was, the apartment building! And Toby was coming out the lobby door, pulling his

jacket closed. He saw her, and she ran to him. He didn't mean it and she didn't mean it, and this was the part where they made up, and then all the rest of the loop would be good—the good time after making up. You had to mix the good and bad. The bad made the good better. She ran to him and hugged him, the smell of the wet leather so strong.

"You were coming after me," she said.

He didn't say anything.

"You were," she said.

"Yeah."

Something clutched at her heart. "It's the best day ever," she said.

"I give it a seven point five."

"You don't know anything," she said. "You got your spooky girl and you had an adventure and you saved the whole world."

"When you put it that way it's a nine. So come on. I'll buy you a hot drink and you can tell me about the tourists from the fifth dimension."

"What time is it?" she asked.

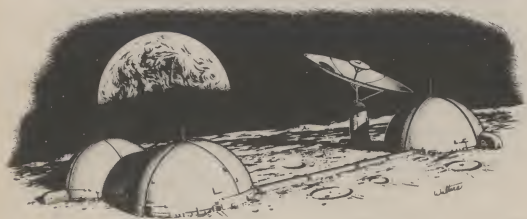
He looked at his watch. "Five of eleven."

"I don't want a hot drink," she said. "Can you take us some place with a nice view where we can sit in the Vee Dub?"

"You bet."

The city spread out before them. The water of Elliot Bay was black. Rain whispered against the car and the cooling engine ticked down like a slow timer. It was awkward with the separate seats, but they snuggled together, Kylie's head pillowed on his chest. He turned the radio on—not to his loud noise-music but a jazz station, like a complement to the rain. They talked, intimately. Kylie invented a life and gave it to him, borrowing from stories her mother and grandmother had told her. He called her spooky, his term of endearment, and he talked about what they would do tomorrow. She accepted the gift of the future he was giving her, but she lived in this moment, now, this sweet inhalation of the present, this happy, happy ending. Then the lights of Seattle seemed to haze over. Kylie closed her eyes, her hand on the explosive sphere, and her mind slumbered briefly in a dark spun cocoon.

Kylie punched through, and the sudden light shift dazzled her. ○



In the last three years, Scott William Carter has sold more than twenty-five short stories to such places as *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Ellery Queen*, and *Weird Tales*, and he has recently begun working on novels. He lives in Oregon with his wife and daughter. You can find out more about his work at www.scottwilliamcarter.com. In his first appearance in *Asimov's*, he takes us to a distant planet and introduces us to . . .

THE TIGER IN THE GARDEN

Scott William Carter

At precisely noon—not one minute earlier, not one minute later—the ship appeared in Regence's sky. It started as a black dot on a perfect canvas of cobalt, like a drop of ink carelessly spilled from a painter's brush. So small, so seemingly insignificant, and yet José felt his whole body tremble at the sight of it. The punctuality did not surprise him. Unless something had changed, this one was a Bal'ani, and they were said to be obsessive about such things. José had made certain to arrive a half hour early at the landing station. On their home world, the Bal'ani were rumored to *eat* those who insulted them.

"Constable Valcorez," the attendant behind him said, "is that truly an Agent's ship?"

"Yes," José said. Hand raised to block the glare of the sun, he watched through the glass doors as the black dot grew quickly in size, soon filling almost his entire field of vision, until, finally, the ship's thrusters stirred up a fog of dust on the bone-colored ground. Behind the pulsing electric fence that surrounded the landing area, the desolate plains extended flat to the horizon, making the ship that much more stark in appearance. He had seen vids of Agent ships, of course, but seeing one up close was both awful and awe-inspiring. There were three other ships outside, freighters that were not small themselves, and the Agent ship was at least as big as all of them *combined*.

The hand of death, José thought. That's what it looked like, with its black gleaming surface and five pincer-like landing gears. The hand of death descending on Regence.

"Do you . . . do you know why they've come, sir?" the attendant asked.

The edge in the man's voice was palpable. Ah, yes, it's already begun, José thought. This was what the Agents did, bringing out the fear in those who should have nothing to fear. He watched the ship touch down, then turned to the young man behind the counter. He could have been looking at a mirror image of himself, albeit one three moon-downs younger: a small man with a slender build, black hair, and deeply bronzed skin. He was a Regence native, just like José. What was his name? He *should* remember. He had met this man before, and he prided himself on remembering people. It was one of the reasons he had risen to Constable at such a an early age.

He smiled when the name came to him. "My dear Philippe," he said, "you know as well as I, that I could not tell you even if I knew."

"Yes, sir," Philippe said. "Thank you, sir. It's just . . . Well, you know, sir. No one . . . well, no one wants them here. It is not a good thing. It is *granza*."

José nodded. *Granza*. A bad omen. If his years at the university at Kelton had not burned out his superstition, as well as created a distaste for Regence's common tongue, he might have been inclined to agree.

He lifted his hood and pushed through the glass doors. He felt the scorching slap of the sun even through fabric designed to shield him from the heat. A few steps and the landscape tinted. UV iris adaptation was a cheap mod, something anybody with even a bit of money could do. His salary as Constable did not allow him to afford the more expensive dust-repellant mod, however, so he squinted as he walked into the dust. He held his breath, but still he could taste the bitterness of the dirt on his lips. The ship's landing elevator was already humming down, three figures visible in the shadowy area beneath the ship.

As he approached, he thought he caught the silver gleam of the Bal'ani's teeth, and he forced himself to continue without hesitation. He could not show weakness. If he ever hoped to be hired off of Regence by the Unity Defense, he could not have a bad report from an Agent on his record. And if he was lucky enough, by the end of the day, to be personally thanked by one that was a Bal'ani—a race that considered praise, from one of their own, the highest compliment one could receive—it would certainly serve him well.

"Agent Korin?" José said. Despite his best efforts, his voice still cracked.

"Only a fool would assume otherwise," the Bal'ani said, emerging from the mist.

José had memorized a greeting in the Bal'ani's language, but one look at his visitor and the words were lost. He had of course seen the alien on the vid when they had spoken the previous day, but, in the harsh sunlight, the creature looked so much more . . . terrifying. It was as if someone had taken two human faces, stretched them until the skin was about to tear, then smashed them against one another. There were four beady black eyes and two snout-like noses, each placed on the misshapen head as if by accident. Then there was the mouth. It was the Bal'ani's most defining feature, taking up half of its face, easily big enough to engulf a child's head in a single bite. The two fangs, encased in metal sheathing,

as was the Bal'ani custom, extended past the stubbled chin. The alien wore a red robe that completely hid its lower body, leaving only the head and the gnarled, three-fingered hands exposed.

Norslim. The word sprang into José's mind. When he was a boy, there was a story, circulated among the children, of a monster that emerged at night and dragged orphan children from their beds, muzzled their mouths with its clawed hands, and hauled its victims deep into the desert to bury them alive. He had not thought of the story in years, though at one time he trembled under his sheets at every creak and groan in an ancient building that produced endless creaks and groans.

Norslim . . . It was nothing but a foolish word. A Regence word. The Bal'ani may have been terrifying, but he was still an Agent. And Agents may have been terrifying, themselves, able to stretch the law to fit their dark whims, but as much as they stretched it, they could not break it—at least as long as one remained vigilant.

The two other figures were security robots of some kind, sleek bipedal things; each had a single red-glowing eye and massive shoulders. They were not like the awkward, jerky robots José was used to seeing. Despite their girth, these machines walked with grace.

"Welcome to Regence," José said, deciding to ignore the Bal'ani's condescending tone. "I am Constable Valcorez, and I'd like to offer my—"

"Let us assume we have exchanged the necessary pleasantries," Korin said, walking past him. "I assume you have a pod waiting?"

The robots had no trouble keeping up with Korin's brisk pace, but José did. "I have transportation," he said. "It is around the—"

"Here is my coded authorization card," Korin said, producing a thin blue wafer from within his robe. "I assume even on your world they are required?"

José took the wafer, slipping it into the inner pocket of his jacket. He knew right away that his hand-held was too out of date to process such a recent card, though he did not want to admit it. It was likely the desk units in the terminal would also be out of date, much to his embarrassment. "Thank you," he said. "Now would it be possible to tell me why you have come to Regence?"

"Not by my own choosing, of course," Korin said, both of his noses wrinkling. On someone else this gesture would have been comical; on the Bal'ani it was deeply disturbing. "It is hard to imagine there are still worlds with not a single Stepdock. To fly here was a considerable inconvenience."

"I'm sorry for that," José said. "We are a poor world with few resources, but there are plans to put a Stepdock—"

"Surely this is not the pod," Korin said.

They had rounded the terminal to the parking area, an open dirt lot empty except for José's six-wheeled vehicle, the wrap-around window cracked, the gray exterior spotted with rust. It was a true pod only in the sense that it *could* hover for short distances, but it was primarily a land vehicle, and a tiny one at that. It could hold all four of them, but it would be a tight squeeze considering the size of the Bal'ani and his robots.

"I'm afraid it's the only one I have," José said.

Korin looked at him. Just for a moment, the Bal'ani's cool exterior fell away, exposing a murderous rage. It lasted a half second at most, but it was enough. There was no doubt in José's mind: if he gave the Bal'ani enough cause, and a few moments in a dark alley when the confining laws of the Unity Defense could be conveniently forgotten, Korin would kill him.

José felt his body go cold, but he maintained his composure and waved his hand over the hood of the pod.

"Access," he said.

The door on the side of the pod swung upward, cranking rhythmically. José started to back away to allow his guests to enter, but Korin was already pushing past him, the robots following. Korin took one side, the robots the other.

José had hoped he could sit next to a robot, but he wasn't about to say so. He squeezed into the pod, doing his best to melt against his side of it, but still his knees brushed against the Bal'ani's. He moved his legs away, but not before he felt himself shudder.

"Are you racist?" Korin asked.

José realized Korin had noticed the reaction, though there was nothing to do now but play ignorant. "I'm sorry?"

"You should be sorry," Korin said, "even if it is understandable. One does not expect civilized behavior from one of your upbringing."

José swallowed. "I really don't—"

"Of course you do," Korin said, "though it is irrelevant to our present situation. I will say this for your benefit, however, and I advise you to listen carefully. If you desire to ascend from your lowly beginnings, you must rise above your savage instincts. It is the only chance you have."

Even as his face burned, José bowed his head. They were only words. When he got off this dust speck, he would do his part to rid the Unity Worlds of the Agents, but for now he would bear the slight. "I'm sorry," he said, "I meant no—"

"Let us be on our way," Korin said. "Our destination is the Harmani Orphanage."

José flinched as if he had been pricked. It was the very place where he had been raised. "The Harmani?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing, Constable?" Korin asked.

Feeling a bit shell-shocked, José spoke the address to the pod. The door clamped down, and then the pod, humming, rose up on its springs. Cool air hissed through the ceiling vents, somewhat masking the Bal'ani's strong, musky odor. The pod headed straight into the main thoroughfare, jostling when it fell into the deep ruts. They were soon in the heart of the city, the mud-stained buildings casting their hard-edged shadows on shirtless children playing alongside the road. The children, and the dour-faced women watching from the glassless windows, gawked at them as they passed. They were so poor that even a dented old pod was the sign of great riches, and José couldn't help but feel ashamed of them. At least their brown skin made it harder from a distance to see the dirt and grime they were never able to wash away—no matter how hard they tried.

"Surely there can't be anyone you're seeking there," José said.

"Oh?" Korin said. "You are so certain? You are privy to information that has escaped the Agents?"

"No, I was only—"

"In my profession one does not rule out any possibility when searching for traitors, Constable. Do you know of a man who operates under the name Henry Wolheim?"

José could instantly visualize the sallow-cheeked old man as if he were sitting next to them, his white hair fluttering, a worn leather book under his arm. Books. There were probably less than a hundred actual printed books on Regence, and half of them were owned by a gardener—one of the man's many paradoxes. Henry Wolheim had come to Regence during José's last year at the orphanage, and José had spent hours in Wolheim's garden as punishment for his constant misbehavior. He had always hoped that if he misbehaved badly enough, they would hold him back a year. It was the old gardener, and a non-native at that, who made him see the benefit of getting an education. Of using that education to do something meaningful with his life. José used to visit with the old man at least a couple of times a year, though it had been some time since his last visit.

"Yes," he said. "But certainly you're not insinuating—"

"Did your law enforcement ever perform a genetic scan on him?"

José pulled out his handheld and punched in Henry's name. "That was before my time, of course, but it looks like we had no reason. His authorization card checked out."

Korin wrinkled his twin noses. "A pity. You see, if you had, we would have caught him the day he arrived. When his genetic sample was recently sent to Earth, our interceptor identified him as Henry Thomas. I assume you know of whom I speak?"

José shook his head. "I'm afraid—"

"If you stayed current with the Registry, you would know he is a notorious computer hacker who was of great assistance to the terrorists attempting to undermine the Unity Defense. He earned the nickname Tiger Thomas because he left a digital holo of a tiger in whatever system he hacked—and he hacked many. In fact, if not for his interference, we surely would have destroyed the terrorist networks years ago."

José found it hard to believe the kindly old man he knew could have been part of the terrorist group—or the Resistance, as they were known among those who sympathized with their cause. José did not despise them as so many of the pro-Unity Worlds crowd did, because he truly believed they had a point, that the Unity Worlds were only a means for the rich and powerful to control the poor and powerless. But he also didn't believe their methods were justified. They had killed in the name of their cause, targeting politicians mostly, but innocent bystanders had been killed as well. He could not see Henry, not gentle Henry, participating in such acts.

José turned to the window. They were passing through one of the worst neighborhoods—there were no *good* neighborhoods on Regence, only bad and worse—and the haggard, emaciated people sitting listlessly in the doorways watched him with shadowed sockets. It was like being watched by the dead. Why would a man like that come to Regence? He could have hidden anywhere. "There must be a mistake," José said.

"I do not make mistakes," Korin said. He paused. "I have, of course, read your file. I know you were at the Harmani Orphanage. Though your file does not specify it, I conclude based on your response that you developed some attachment to Wolheim. Perhaps he was some sort of father figure?"

The comment, both in its bluntness and its utter accuracy, made José stiffen. He had never thought of Henry as a father, at least not consciously, but it was fair to say that he had treated him as such. Like many of the children, he had referred to the gardener as *valda*, meaning old, lovable man, a term that often *was* used when speaking of one's father. José felt a flash of anger at the Bal'ani for making him remember something that now embarrassed him greatly.

He decided to deflect Korin's question by changing the subject. "You said a genetic sample had been sent to Earth. Why?"

"Irrelevant," Korin said. "What is relevant is that we have located a traitor to the Unity Worlds, and he will be convicted and tried accordingly. And, of course, I expect your complete assistance."

There was a tone that José didn't like, as if Korin was implying José might be a hindrance.

"I will of course do everything within the law to make sure justice is done," José said curtly.

They arrived at the Harmani a few minutes later. The orphanage, and the Church of Unification across the street, were some of the oldest buildings on Regence, boxy stone-and-mortar structures built by the earliest settlers. The monks had worked tirelessly over the years to make sure the buildings remained respectable, and the fresh blue paint and bright flowers under the windows spoke to their efforts. But the many cracks in the walls, like wrinkles under heavy makeup, were dead giveaways to the true state of the buildings.

Some orphanage boys—distinct in their blue uniforms—were playing flipdisc in the street, and they scurried away as the pod parked in front of the wooden door. When José stepped out into the heat, raising his hood, the front door opened and a portly man in a yellow-and-blue Unification robe stepped out to greet him. He was shaved bald except for his white sideburns.

"Hello, Father Jansen," José said.

"*Trenda!*" the monk exclaimed, smiling. "My boy, José! It is so good to see you. . . ." His voice, as well as his smile, faded when he saw who else was emerging from the pod. He swallowed. "Who are your guests?"

"I am Agent Korin," the Bal'ani said, stepping up next to José, his shadow engulfing the monk. "These are my sentries, unsentient robots who do not need to be referred to directly. Please take us to Henry Wolheim."

Jansen looked at José, confusion in his eyes. "Henry? But why?"

"That is not your concern," Korin replied, before José had a chance to answer. "Can you lead us to him, or should my sentries search the premises?"

"Please, father," José said, "we don't want to alarm the children."

"Well, I imagine he's in the back garden, as he always is," Jansen said, turning back to the door.

José followed the monk into the building, Korin and the robots following. They walked down a narrow hall lit by candles, the robots' metal feet clicking on the cobblestone floor. The place, especially its familiar musty odor, brought back a flood of memories for José. A few boys appeared at the other end of the hall, stopped dead in their tracks when they saw who was approaching, then scurried back the way they had come.

Though José could have easily taken them to the garden himself, he allowed Father Jansen to lead them to the double glass doors. The glass was opaque, but the green color was everywhere. They stepped through the doorway into a garden surrounded by ugly brown buildings. It should not have been a place where plants could grow—the shadows were far too deep—and yet the place was brimming with plants, the air heavy and moist, the smell of life invigorating. A red brick path wove its way through the rich soil.

A man was humming. Jansen led them to the source of the voice, and there was Henry, down on all fours planting violet flowers along the back wall. His hair was a bit whiter, his shoulders a bit bonier, but otherwise he was as José remembered: a spindly man who was more arms and legs than torso, his skin much paler than a native's.

"Henry," Father Jansen said, "there are some people here to see you."

The gardener continued humming, working on his flowers as if he had not heard. José noticed that his green jumpsuit, spotted with dirt, appeared to be on backward.

"We have no time for such foolishness," Korin said. He looked at his sentries. "Apprehend him."

"Wait," Father Jansen said.

But the robots had already moved, one on each side of Henry, and together they grabbed his arms. Henry cried out as he was hauled to his feet. As the robots turned him around, Henry struggled.

"Monsters!" he cried. "There are monsters in my garden! Let me go! *Trenda! Ipsin!*"

The hysterical behavior startled José. He had never seen Henry behave this way. The man had always been the epitome of calm, regardless of the circumstances.

"Don't hurt him," Father Jansen pleaded. "He doesn't know what he's doing. He's . . ."

The monk trailed off, as Henry's body had suddenly gone slack. He was staring at José, his gaze so fixated that José felt his cheeks burn with shame. He hated that he was doing this.

"My boy," he said. "I know you. Yes, yes. . . . They say I have forgotten, but I have not forgotten you."

All at once José understood why Henry's genetic sample had been sent to Earth, and he felt a sinking feeling in his stomach when the realization hit him. He looked at Jansen. "Trident's?" he said.

Father Jansen bowed his head. "I'm afraid so. The laboratory on Earth confirmed it."

"My boy, my boy," Henry said, pulling against his captors, trying to move toward José. "Why did you bring these monsters into my garden? Why?"

José swallowed. Trident's Disease had been around since the Step-

dock first came into use, a neurological disorder that struck the elderly, and over a period of ten years caused madness and eventually death. A small percentage were genetically predisposed to get it if they used the Stepdocks, which was why a genetic sample was now required before anyone could use the system. But that was now. In the early days no one knew about Trident's, and someone like Henry would have used the instantaneous transportation devices in ignorance of their possible side effects.

Korin pulled a handheld out of his robe and pointed it at Henry. "There is a match," he said, turning and walking back along the path, his red robe billowing behind him. "Bring him."

The robots followed, dragging Henry along with them. The old man was beginning to thrash about again.

"Please, boy! Don't let the monsters take me!"

"What is his crime?" Father Jansen called after Korin. "You must tell me his crime!"

But Korin didn't break stride and José heard the glass door open. The robots carried the screaming gardener out of his sanctuary. Father Jansen made a move to follow, and José grabbed his arm.

"Don't make it worse, Father," he said. "Henry was once part of the Resistance, a man known as Tiger Thomas. There's nothing we can do."

Father Jansen jerked his arm away, his face flushed. "Impossible! Not the Henry I know!"

"I'm afraid the evidence is there."

Father Jansen shook his head. "Even if it is true, even if it is . . . look at him. Just look at him. What's the point in taking him now? He doesn't even remember what he's done. Hasn't he suffered enough?"

José didn't know what to say, and he didn't want Korin to leave him behind. "I'm sorry," he said, hurrying after the Bal'ani.

When he stepped into the building, he heard Henry's distant screaming echoing off the stone walls. As he ran, he passed dozens of orphans who were gathered at the doorways, their eyes wide and fearful. He wished he could say something to comfort them, but there was no time.

The door to his pod was already closing when José reached it, and he dived inside. All the seats were occupied, so he squatted in the middle,

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catching his breath. There wasn't much space, knees pressing up against him on all sides.

"He's come to rescue me!" Henry shouted. The robot next to him pinned him against the seat. Henry struggled to no avail.

"You may stay if you wish," Korin said to José. "I believe the situation is causing you emotional distress."

"I'm fine," José snapped, and instructed the pod to take them to the landing port.

The pod rose up on its wheels and rumbled back down the street. José glanced through the back window and saw Father Jansen at the curb, dozens of children gathered around him, faces forlorn. "José!" Henry cried. "See, see? I do remember. I remember lots of things. I remember the time you came to my garden and you were crying. Do you remember? You said you hated Regence. You were quite upset, oh so many tears. Yes, that was you. I remember it perfectly."

"Please, Henry," José said. "Just be quiet. We'll be at the landing port soon."

"Oh, Henry, is it?" the old man said, looking hurt. "You didn't used to call me Henry. You called me something else. It was a word of your world. What was it? I can't . . . No . . ." He started crying. "So many words, lost."

Valda, José thought. But he wouldn't say the word aloud. He had to be strong. It wasn't his fault that Henry had gotten into this situation.

"What a quaint sentimental display," Korin said, stroking the metal sheathing surrounding his fangs. "On our world we sometimes observe your theatrical presentations so we might better understand your peculiar emotional defects, but it is so much more vivid when seeing them in person."

José said nothing. Henry started humming again, and José realized it wasn't one song but parts of many jumbled together. They were all songs of Regence, songs Henry sang to the children sick in the infirmary. He had sung them to José more than once.

As the pod wound its way through the desolate streets, José agonized about what was happening. The old man might have been guilty of a crime, or he might have been a hero—it all depended on your point of view—but, whatever the case, it would do no good punishing him now. He was nothing but a shell of who he used to be.

And yet, even if José *could* do something, was he willing to sacrifice his career, maybe even his life, to help Henry?

He had a future. Even Henry—if he had all of his faculties intact—would have told him not to sacrifice himself. Hadn't the old man said as much on the day of José's graduation? *There are times when a man of conscience must do what's in his own interest, even if it is not in the interest of his people, though it pains him greatly.* José realized now that Henry had probably been trying to console himself for abandoning the Resistance. If he had done what was right for himself, why shouldn't José?

But, as the pod came to an abrupt halt, José still felt as if he was making a mistake. Abandoning the Resistance and abandoning an old mentor were not at all the same. The robots carried the gardener out of the pod and around the terminal, Korin following. José's eyes tinted, but he did

not raise his hood. Since Henry wore none, he did not feel he should, either. Henry's feet barely touched the ground, stirring up the dust. When the Agent's ominous ship came into view, Henry whimpered.

"Your presence is no longer required," Korin said, looking at José. "Thank you for your assistance. I assume you will send along my authorization card when you have a chance to process it."

The Bal'ani's thank you only made José feel worse. And as he stopped on the sun-baked ground, so bright that it was like a mirror, he realized he could no longer pretend he was doing the right thing. It did not matter that it was the law. It did not matter that, if he acted, his ambitions would turn to dust. He sensed that if he did not act, that if he did nothing now, when it mattered most, his very self would be lost.

And Korin's mention of the authorization card gave him a flash of inspiration.

"I'm afraid I can't let you take him just yet," José said.

Korin, who had already walked a dozen paces away, stopped and turned. José noticed for the first time that the Bal'ani's robe was the same color as human blood.

"Excuse me?"

With Korin's hideousness completely exposed under the glare of the sun, the word *norslim* again jumped into José's mind. This time he did not force it away. Yes, the Agent was a *norslim*. It had nothing to do with his appearance and everything to do with what he represented. He was also *granza*. José would not deny either of these things, but neither would he fear them.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?" he said, smiling.

"I heard you perfectly, Constable," Korin said curtly. "What I don't understand is what kind of game you are playing."

"It is no game," José said. Despite his pounding heart, he walked toward the Bal'ani. "And unless you want to commit a serious violation of Unity law, I would suggest you tell your minions to take Henry no further."

Korin stared at José for another beat, his eyes full of wrath, then turned and ordered his robots to stop. They froze, about to step onto the landing elevator. Only Henry, who was screaming and flailing, showed any movement. Korin looked back at José.

"Explain yourself," he said. "And I warn you, if I find that you are attempting to—"

"Spare me your warnings," José said, producing the Bal'ani's authorization card from his jacket. "You see, sir, your authorization card has not been processed. We are but a poor world with few resources, and we have no equipment that can process such a modern card. We, of course, will obtain that equipment, but it will take some time."

"This is bureaucratic nonsense!" Korin cried. "You know as well as I that my card will check out!"

"Oh?" José said. "You have some information I am not privy to, sir? I'm afraid I must follow the law, and the law clearly states that your authorization card must be cleared before you can act on behalf of the Unity Defense. Unless, of course, you wish to *violate* the law. . . ."

Korin fumed silently, his face twitching as if he were about to burst. There was a moment when José thought Korin was going to dispense with the law and kill José on the spot, but, after a few seconds, Korin signaled his sentries to return.

"You realize you are only delaying the inevitable," he said. "Once I clear this matter up with your superiors, I shall return and apprehend Thomas."

José nodded. "Perhaps," he said, taking his time, realizing that despite the danger, he was truly enjoying watching the Bal'ani squirm. "Are you worried a man with Trident's might be a flight risk? Or are you afraid he'll die before you get a chance to convict him?" And what he thought, but didn't say, was: who knew what would happen between now and then? It was entirely possible that when the Agent returned, Henry would be missing. It was also more than likely that if he *was* missing, he would not be found.

Korin shook his head, ordered the robots to leave Henry, then turned and walked toward his ship. He didn't go far without offering one parting shot.

"You are throwing away your future for a traitor," he said.

To this, José said nothing. He watched the Agent and his robots ride the elevator into their black ship. It was quite possible Korin was right. It may have been the greatest thing he had ever done, or it may have been the worst.

"The monsters are leaving," Henry said, his head bobbing. "They are leaving, José. Watch them go."

Standing side by side as the ship lifted into the sky, that was exactly what they did. They watched as the hand of death soon became a tiny black dot, something small, something insignificant, until it was gone altogether, leaving the sky once again a perfect canvas of cobalt. José knew there was much to do before the Agents returned—communiqués to send to reporters, complaints to file with the appropriate authorities. He would make very certain that the Agents would be under heavy scrutiny when they returned. None of it would probably help José's future, but it would help spare Regence from the worst of the Agents' wrath.

But that was tomorrow's work.

When the dust cleared, José took his old mentor by the arm and led him back toward the pod.

"Let's get you home, *Valda*," he said. "Your garden needs you." ○

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GROWING OLD THE MYTHIC WAY

Green/Man Grown Old

Wrists veined like leaves,
Hair the color of flowers gone by,
He bends with every passing wind.
He can no longer lie with a lover,
Nor dance inside the storm.
Too much hails hurts his hide.
The swollen river makes his right ankle seize up.
He is always thirsty, even in the rain.
Yet he does not complain.
He does not complain.

Last Unicorn

Others, like foxes, go to ground,
But the last unicorn, whitened,
Faded the color of old sheets hung
On the trailer park line,
Goes to the edge of the ocean.
The tops of the waves are as white as he.
Brothers, he thinks, *sisters*,
And plunges in, not so much a death
As a transfiguration.



At Last, The Little Mermaid

She no longer remembers the knives in her feet,
Or the one in her hand, so close to his throat
It might have pricked him without her meaning to.
She no longer remembers the curse
Or the cure or the painful interstices.
All she remembers is foam, the bubbles rising,
And the songs of angels,
So like the murmururation of the sea.

Jack, the Giant, and All After

Two old men, playing chess, in a house of old men.
As they play, a harp keeps them company.
They share a history, though neither can recall it.
One so large, his memories are all of sky.
The other so small, he thinks all day of earth.
Two old friends, sharing a game, whose complicated rules
Are the only thing they can agree upon.

Troll Under Bridge

It is almost dawn and the troll under the bridge
Gets to his knees, crawls out through the thin water
To the river bank. He is too old to catch billygoats,
Too old to threaten children at their play.
But he is not too old for one last thing:
To stay out and watch the sun rise
For the first time in his life—and the last.

Fairies in a Ring

One more turn, dear friends, one more,
And then we will be gone.
No one believes in us you see,
And all they want is lawn.

—Jane Yolen



Robert Reed's collection of short stories, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, was recently released by Golden Gryphon Press. It contains several tales that were originally published in *Asimov's*. In his latest story, he synthesizes a peculiar, and, at times, disquieting TV series that consists of . . .

EIGHT EPISODES

Robert Reed

With minimal fanfare and next to no audience, *Invasion of a Small World* debuted in the summer of 2016, and after a brief and disappointing run, the series was deservedly shelved.

One glaring problem was its production values: Computer animation had reached a plateau where reality was an easy illusion, spectacle was the industry norm, and difficult tricks like flowing water and human faces were beginning to approximate what was real. Yet the show's standards were barely adequate, even from an upstart Web network operating with limited capital and too many hours of programming to fill. The landscapes and interior shots would have been considered state-of-the-art at the turn of the century, but not in its premiere year. The characters were inflicted with inexpressive faces and stiff-limbed motions, while their voices were equally unconvincing, employing amateur actors or some cut-rate audio-synthesis software. With few exceptions, the dialogue was sloppy, cluttered with pauses and clumsy phrasing, key statements often cut off in mid-sentence. Most critics decided that the series' creators were striving for a real-life mood. But that was purely an interpretation. Press kits were never made available, and no interviews were granted with anyone directly involved in the production, leaving industry watchers entirely to their own devices—another problem that served to cripple *Invasion*.

Other factors contributed to the tiny audience. One issue that couldn't be discussed openly was the racial makeup of the cast. Success in the lucrative North American market meant using characters of obvious European extraction. Yet the series' leading man was an Indian astronomer working at a fictional college set in, of all places, South Africa. With an unpronounceable name and thick accent, Dr. Smith—as his few fans dubbed him—was a pudgy, prickly creation with a weakness for loud shirts and deep belches. His wife was a homely apparition who understood nothing about his world-shaking work, while his children, in direct

contrast to virtually every other youngster inhabiting popular entertainment, were dim-witted creatures offering nothing that was particularly clever or charming.

A paucity of drama was another obvious weakness. The premiere episode involved a routine day in Dr. Smith's life. Eighteen hours of unexceptional behavior was compressed to fifty-three minutes of unexceptional behavior. Judging by appearances, the parent network inserted commercial breaks at random points. The series' pivotal event was barely noticed by the early viewers: One of Dr. Smith's graduate students was working with Permian-age rock samples, searching for key isotopes deposited by ancient supernovae. The student asked her professor about a difficult piece of lab equipment. As always, the dialogue was dense and graceless, explaining almost nothing to the uninitiated. Genuine scientists—some of the series' most unapologetic fans—liked to point out that the instruments and principles were genuine, though the nomenclature was shamelessly contrived. Fourteen seconds of broadcast time introduced a young graduate student named Mary—a mixed-race woman who by no measure could be considered attractive. She was shown asking Dr. Smith for help with the problematic instrument, and he responded with a wave of a pudgy hand and a muttered, "Later." Following ads for tiny cars and a powerful asthma medicine, the astronomer ordered his student to come to his office and lock the door behind her. What happened next was only implied. But afterwards Dr. Smith was seen sitting with his back to his desk and his belt unfastened, and the quick-eyed viewer saw Mary's tiny breasts vanish under a bra and baggy shirt. Some people have interpreted her expression as pain, emotional or otherwise. Others have argued that her face was so poorly rendered that it was impossible to fix any emotion to her, then or later. And where good writers would have used dialogue to spell out the importance of the moment, bad writers decided to ignore the entire interpersonal plotline. With a casual voice, Mary mentioned to her advisor/lover that she had found something strange in the Permian stone.

"Strange," he repeated.

With her thumb and finger, she defined a tiny space. "Metal. A ball."

"Ball?"

"In the rock."

Smith scratched his fat belly for a moment, saying nothing. (Judging by log tallies, nearly 10 percent of the program's small audience turned away at that point.) Then he quietly said to her, "I do not understand."

"What it is . . ."

"What?"

She said, "I don't know either."

"In what rock?"

"Mine. The mudstone—"

"You mean it's artificial. . . ?"

"Looks so," she answered.

He said, "Huh."

She finished buttoning her shirt, the back of her left hand wiping at the corner of her mouth.

"Where?" Smith asked.

She gave the parent rock's identification code.

"No, the metal ball," he interrupted. "Where is it now?"

"My desk drawer. In a white envelope."

"And how big?"

"Two grains of rice, about."

Then, one last time, the main character said, "Huh." And, finally, without any interest showing in his face, he fastened his belt.

The next three episodes covered not days, but several months. Again, none of the scientific work was explained, and nothing resembling a normal plotline emerged from the routine and the tedious. The increasingly tiny audience watched Dr. Smith and two of his graduate students working with an object almost too small to be resolved on the screen—another significant problem with the series. Wouldn't a human-sized artifact have made a greater impact? The ball's metal shell proved to be an unlikely alloy of nickel and aluminum. Cosmic radiation and tiny impacts had left the telltale marks one would expect after a long drifting journey through space. Using tiny lasers, the researchers carefully cut through the metal shell, revealing a diamond interior. Then the diamond heart absorbed a portion of the laser's energy, and once charged, it powered up its own tiny light show. Fortunately a nanoscopic camera had been inserted into the hole, and the three scientists were able to record what they witnessed—a rush of complex images coupled with an increasingly sophisticated array of symbols.

"What is this?" they kept asking one another.

"Maybe it's language," Mary guessed. Correctly, as it happened. "Someone's teaching us . . . trying to . . . a new language."

Dr. Smith gave her a shamelessly public hug.

Then the other graduate student—a Brazilian fellow named Carlos—pointed out that, whatever the device was, Mary had found it in rock that was at least a quarter of a billion years old. "And that doesn't count the time this little machine spent in space, which could be millions more years."

After the show's cancellation, at least one former executive admitted to having been fooled. "We were promised a big, loud invasion," he told an interviewer from *Rolling Stone*. "I talked to the series' producer. He said an invasion would begin right after episode four. Yeah, we knew the build-up was going to be slow. But then aliens from the dinosaur days were going to spring to life and start burning cities."

"Except," said the interviewer.

"What?"

"That's not quite true. The Permian happened before there were any dinosaurs."

With a shrug, the ex-executive brushed aside that mild criticism. "Anyway, the important thing is that bad-ass aliens were supposed to come out of the rock. They were going to grow huge and start kicking us around. At least that's what the production company—EXL Limited—assured us. A spectacle. And since we didn't have to pay much for those episodes, we ended up purchasing the first eight shows after seeing only a few minutes of material. . . ."

Invasion was cancelled after the fifth episode.

The final broadcast episode was an artless synopsis of the next twenty months of scientific work. Dr. Smith and his students were just a tiny portion of a global effort. Experts on six continents were making a series of tiny, critical breakthroughs. Most of the story involved faceless researchers exchanging dry e-mails about the tiny starship's text and images. Translations were made; every shred of evidence began to support the obvious but incredible conclusions. The culminating event was a five-minute news conference. Dripping sweat, shaking from nerves, the astronomer explained to reporters that he had found a functioning starship on Earth. After a glancing thanks to unnamed colleagues, he explained how, in the remote past, perhaps long before there was multicellular life on Earth, an alien species had manufactured trillions of tiny ships like this one. The ships were cast off into space, drifting slowly to planetary systems scattered throughout the galaxy. The vessel that he had personally recovered was already ancient when it dropped onto a river bottom near the edge of Gondwanaland. Time had only slightly degraded its on-board texts—a history of the aliens and an explanation into the nature of life in the universe. By all evidence, he warned, human beings were late players to an old drama. And like every other intelligent species in the universe, they would always be small in numbers and limited in reach.

The final scene of that fifth episode was set at Dr. Smith's home. His oldest son was sitting before a large plasma screen, destroying alien spaceships with extraordinarily loud weapons. In what proved to be the only conversation between those two characters, Smith sat beside his boy, asking, "Did you see me?"

"What?"

"The news conference—"

"Yeah, I watched."

"So?" he said. And when no response was offered, he asked, "What did you think?"

"About what?"

"The lesson—"

"What? People don't matter?" The boy froze the battle scene and put down his controls. "I think that's stupid."

His father said nothing.

"The universe isn't empty and poor." The boy was perhaps fourteen, and his anger was the most vivid emotion in the entire series. "Worlds are everywhere, and a lot of them have to have life."

"Millions are blessed, yes," Dr. Smith replied. "But hundreds of billions more are too hot, too cold. They are metal-starved, or married to dangerous suns."

His son stared at the frozen screen, saying nothing.

"The alien texts only confirm our most recent evidence, you know. The earth is a latecomer. Stellar births are slowing, in the Milky Way, and everywhere, and the production of terrestrial worlds peaked two or three billion years before our home was created."

"These texts of yours . . . they say that intelligent life stays at home?"

"Most of the time, yes."

"Aliens don't send out real starships?"

"It is far too expensive," Smith offered.

The boy pushed out his lower lip. "Humans are different," he maintained. "No."

"We're going to build a working stardrive. Soon, I bet. And then we'll visit our neighboring stars and colonize those worlds—"

"We can't."

"Because they tell us we can't?"

"Because it is impossible." His father shook his head, saying with authority, "The texts are explicit. Moving large masses requires prohibitive energies. And terraforming is a difficult, often impossible trick. And that is why almost every world that we have found to date looks as sterile as the day they were born."

But the teenage boy would accept none of that. "You know, don't you? That these aliens are just lying to us? They're afraid of human beings, because they know we're the toughest, meanest things in the universe. And we're going to take them on."

For a long moment, Dr. Smith held silent.

Then the boy continued his game, and into the mayhem of blasters, the father mouthed a single dismissive word: "Children."

Eighteen months later, the fledging Web network declared bankruptcy, and a small consortium acquired its assets, including *Invasion of a Small World*. Eager to recoup their investment, the new owners offered all eight episodes as a quick-and-dirty DVD package. When sales proved somewhat better than predicted, a new version was cobbled together, helped along by a genuine ad budget. The strongest initial sales came from the tiny pool of determined fans—young and well educated, with little preference for nationality or gender. But the scientists in several fields, astronomy and paleontology included, were the ones who created a genuine buzz that eventually put *Invasion* into the public eye.

The famous sixth episode helped trigger the interest: That weak, rambling tale of Dr. Smith, his family and students, was temporarily suspended. Instead, the full fifty-three minutes were dedicated to watching a barren world spinning silently in deep space. According to corporate memos, the last three episodes arrived via the Web, bundled in a single package. But it was this episode that effectively killed the series. There were no explanations. Nothing showed but the gray world spinning, twenty minutes before the point-of-view gradually pulled away. The world was just a tiny speck of metal lost in the vastness of space. For astronomers, it was a fascinating moment—a vivid illustration that the universe could be an exceedingly boring place. Stars were distant points of light, and there was only silence, and even when millions of years were compressed into a nap-length moment, nothing was produced that could be confused with great theatre.

But what the astronomers liked best—what got the buzz going—were the final few minutes of the episode. Chance brought the tiny starship into the solar system, and chance guided it past a younger Saturn. The giant moon, Titan, swung close before the ship was kicked out to Neptune's orbit.

Then it drifted sunward again, Mars near enough to reveal its face. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, Titan was bathed in a much denser atmosphere, while Mars was a temporarily wet world, heated by a substantial impact event. Experts in those two worlds were impressed. Only in the last year or two, probes had discovered what *Invasion* predicted on its own, including pinpointing the impact site near the Martian South Pole.

In much the same way, episode seven made the paleontologists crazy.

With its long voyage finished, the tiny starship struck the Earth's upper atmosphere, quickly losing its momentum as well as a portion of its hull. The great southern continent was rendered accurately enough to make any geologist smile, while the little glimpses of Permian ecosystems were even more impressive. Whoever produced the series (and there was a growing controversy on that matter), they had known much about protomammals and the early reptiles, cycads and tree ferns. One ancient creature—lizard in form, though not directly related to any modern species—was the only important misstep. Yet five months later, a team working in South Africa uncovered a set of bones that perfectly matched what a vanished dramatic series had predicted . . . and what was already a cultish buzz grew into a wild, increasingly public cacophony. . . .

At least forty thousand sites—chat rooms and blogs and such—were dedicated to supporting the same inevitable conclusion.

By means unknown, aliens had sent a message to earthlings, and it took the form of *Invasion of a Small World*.

The eighth episode was a genuine treasure.

Dr. Smith reappeared. Several years older, divorced and with his belly fat stripped off by liposuction, he was shown wandering happily through a new life of endless celebrity. His days and long evenings were spent with at least three mistresses as well as a parade of world leaders. Accustomed to the praise of others, he was shown grinning confidently while offering his interpretations of the ancient message. The universe was almost certainly sprinkled with life, he explained. But despite that prolificacy, the cosmos remained an enormous, very cold, and exceptionally poor place. The gulfs between living worlds were completely unbridgeable. No combination of raw energy and questing genius could build a worthy stardrive. Moreover, even direct communication between local species was rarely worth its considerable cost, since civilizations rarely if ever offered each other anything with genuine worth.

"Technology has distinct limits," he warned the starlets and world leaders that he met at cocktail parties. "Humans are already moving into the late stages of scientific endeavor. What matters most, to us and to any wise species, is the careful shepherding of energy and time. That is why we must care for our world and the neighboring planets inside our own little solar system. We must treasure every day while wasting nothing, if only to extend our histories as far as into the future as possible."

"That strikes me as such depressing news," said one prime minister—a statuesque woman blessed with a starlet's beautiful face. "If there really are millions and billions of living worlds, as you claim, and if all the great minds on all of those worlds are thinking hard about this single problem,

shouldn't somebody learn how to cheat the speed of light or create free energy through some clever trick?"

"If that were so," Dr. Smith replied, "then every world out there would be alive, and the giant starships would arrive at our doorstep every few minutes. But instead, human experience has discovered precisely one starfaring vessel, and it was a grain of metallic dust, and to reach us it had to be exceptionally lucky, and, even then, it had to wait a quarter of a billion years to be noticed."

The prime minister sipped her virgin Mary and chewed on her lower lip. Then with a serious tone, she said, "But to me . . . there seems to be another reasonable explanation waiting for our attention . . ."

"Which would be what, madam?"

"Subterfuge," she offered. "The aliens are intentionally misleading us about the nature of the universe."

Bristling, he asked, "And why would they do such a thing?"

"To cripple our future," she replied. "By convincing us to remain home, they never have to face us between the stars."

"Perhaps you're right to think that, madam," said the old astronomer, nodding without resolve. Then in his final moment in the series' final episode, he said, "A lie is as good as a pill, if it helps you sleep. . . ."

For years, every search to uncover the creative force behind *Invasion of a Small World* came up empty. And in the public mind, that single mystery remained the final, most compelling part of the story.

Former executives with the doomed network had never directly met with the show's producers. But they could recount phone conversations and teleconferences and e-mails exchanged with three apparent producers. Of course, by then, it was possible to invent a digital human face and voice while weaving a realistic mix of human gestures. Which led some to believe that slippery forces were plainly at work here—forces that no human eye had ever witnessed.

Tracking down the original production company produced only a dummy corporation leading to dusty mailboxes and several defunct Web addresses. Every name proved fictional, both among the company's officers and those in the brief credits rolling at the end of each episode. Surviving tax forms lacked any shred of useful information. But where the IRS might have chased down a successful cheat, the plain truth was that whoever was responsible for *Invasion* had signed away all future rights in exchange for a puddle of cash.

The few skeptics wondered if something considerably more ordinary was at play here. Rumors occasionally surfaced about young geniuses working in the Third World—usually in the Indian tech-cities. Employing pirated software and stolen equipment, they had produced what would eventually become the fifth most successful media event in history. But in the short term, their genius had led nowhere but to obscurity and financial ruin. Three different candidates were identified—young men with creative minds and most of the necessary skills. Did one of them build *Invasion* alone? Or was it a group effort? And was the project's failure the reason why each of them committed suicide shortly after the series' cancellation?

But if they were the creators, why didn't any trail lead to them? Perhaps

because the consortium that held all rights to *Invasion* had obscured the existing evidence. And why? Obviously to help feed this infectious and delicious mood of suspicion. To maintain an atmosphere where no doubts could find a toehold, where aliens were conversing with humans, and where the money continued to flow to the consortium like a great green river.

The most durable explanation was provided by one of the series' most devoted fans—a Nobel laureate in physics who was happy to beat the drum for the unthinkable. "*Invasion* is true everywhere but in the specifics," he argued. "I think there really was an automated starship. But it was bigger than a couple of grains of rice. As big as a fist, or a human head. But still small and unmanned. The ship entered our solar system during the Permian. With the bulk of it in orbit, pieces must have landed on our world. Scouts with the size and legs of small cockroaches, maybe. Maybe. And if you take the time to think it through, you see that it would be a pretty silly strategy, letting yourself become a tiny fossil in some enormous bed of mudstone. What are the odds that you'd survive for 250 million years, much else ever get noticed there?"

"No, if you are an automated starship, what would be smart is for that orbiting mothership to take a seat where nothing happens and she can see everything. On the moon, I'd guess. She still has the antennas that she used to hear the scouts' reports. She sleeps and waits for radio signals from the earth, and when they arrive, she studies what she hears. She makes herself into a student of language and technology. And when the time is ripe—when she has a product to sell—she expels the last of her fuel, leaving the moon to land someplace useful. Which is pretty much anywhere, these days.

"Looking like a roach, maybe, she connects to the Web and offers her services at a cut-rate price.

"And that is how she delivers her message.

"Paraphrasing my fictional colleague, 'A lie is as good as a truth, if it leads you to enlightenment.'"

The final scene in the last episode only seemed anticlimactic. The one-time graduate student, Mary, had been left behind by world events. From the beginning, her critical part in the research had been downplayed. But the series' creator, whoever or whatever it was, saw no useful drama in that treachery. The woman was middle-aged and happy in her obscurity, plain as always and pregnant for at least the second time.

A ten-year-old daughter was sitting beside Mary, sharing a threadbare couch.

The girl asked her mother what she believed. Was the universe really so empty and cold? And was this the way it would always be?

Quietly, her mother said, "I think that's basically true, yes."

The girl looked saddened.

But then Mary patted her daughter on the back of a hand, smiling with confidence. "But dear, I also believe this," she said. "Life is an invasion wherever it shows itself. It is relentless and it is tireless, and it conquers every little place where living is possible. And before the universe ends, all the good homes will know the sounds of wet breathing and the singing of glorious songs." ○

THE NINTH PART OF DESIRE

Matthew Johnson

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The top note was rage, a shallow monoamine layer of blind fury. Not bad, Raf thought. It didn't have the staged, teeth grit quality most angers had. The bottom note was fear, chilling and lingering; an organic absolute, it was rich and deep, a nice juxtaposition with the synthetic anger. The dry out . . . The dry-out note was desire. He wanted—he didn't know what he wanted; to do something, have something, be something. He simply wanted.

He keyed for a palate-cleanser of calm, as much to control his own emotions as the ones he had just consumed. Emotions often felt different in full hookup than on a touche, and it was too early in the development to know if the effect would even be consistent. Still . . . His mind buzzing, Raf quickly shelved his work and locked up the office. He grabbed a celebratory Eat-More bar from the vending machine in the hall, started for home.

The TV was on when he opened the door, the sound of an overwrought love scene coming from the living room. Raf stood in the doorway for a moment, listening. The scene ended, and there was a pause; then an expressionless voice asked, "What emotion were you just seeing: *anger* or *love*?"

There was a beep, then another pause, and the voice said, "*Anger* is incorrect. The correct answer is *love*. Would you like to try again?" Another beep sounded and Raf went into the living room.

She was on the couch, and, for a moment, Raf thought—as he did once

or twice a week—that she was back, really back; her eyes were alive as she saw him, her posture open. Then Raf saw the dreamlink hooked to the back of her head flashing green, and reality set in once again.

There was nothing whatsoever wrong with Naomi's mind: like most people with Prospero's Disease she was able to remember, once she had been trained to, that you were supposed to be happy when your husband came home. It was just that for her that meant selecting *happy* from the menu in front of her and receiving a five-minute burst of emotifiers to simulate the feeling. Raf knew exactly how happy she was. He had designed the juice himself.

"Hey, honey," he said, trying to hold onto that first feeling. "I think you can quit now."

Naomi nodded, switched off the interactive board in her lap. "Okay," she said, as indiscriminately happy about that as about Raf being home.

"How's it going?" Raf asked.

"My day's score was 57 percent right."

Jesus, Raf thought, three years of therapy and her odds of recognizing an emotion were just slightly better than chance. At least she was happy about it. With emotifiers and training, a patient with Prospero's Disease could live a life that looked almost normal: they could feel the appropriate emotions for most situations they were likely to encounter. But they could not choose what to feel; they could not want to do anything. A Prospero's patient could die of thirst, or starve, without ever wanting a drink or a meal.

"I've got some good news," Raf said, sitting down next to Naomi on the couch.

"That's great," she said, her voice a single cheery note.

"I think I've found it. I really think I have, this time," he said.

She was looking at him intently, and Raf realized the five minute burst of happiness had worn off; she was trying to read his expression, know what to trigger next, as she had been trained to do. He gave an extra-wide grin to signal her, and her dreamlink flashed green as she keyed for happiness again.

"That's great," she said.

She had magnetic eyes. They were green, and flashed like lightning when she smiled; it was an effort for Raf to look down at her nametag. NAOMI MARTIN, it said, MILNE NEURO-T beneath. It was stuck onto a burgundy blouse, low-cut but respectable, worn over a knee length black skirt, black tights beneath. They were part of a clutch of people, all talking, but Raf could feel the group vectoring around her.

"That was a pretty good paper," she was saying, and it took Raf a moment to realize she was talking to him. "That fight-or-flight absolute you guys extracted is going to wind up in a lot of dreams."

He felt himself blushing, wished he could take something to stop it. "It was the whole team's work. I was just picked to present it."

"Modest, too. Not bad for a grad student. You must have offers coming in from every direction." She gave him a wicked grin. "Job offers, I mean."

Raf smiled back weakly. "Oh—well—you're at Milne? Is that a good place to work?"

"It's okay," she said. "I like living here. I've just started on contract—mostly worked freelance so far. I'm a tester, not a designer."

That made sense: to be a tester you had to be able to feel things more strongly, more acutely than regular people, distinguish between different shades of fear or excitement. It was natural that someone like that would draw people into her orbit. "What brings you here, then? I mean—" he ran a hand over his forehead, sweeping away hair and sweat—"this isn't exactly excitement city."

She shrugged then smiled again, and he knew how it felt to be a deer in the headlights. "Mostly just a few days away from the office—but I do like to know both sides of the business," she said. "It's kind of crazy the way we do it—you guys do your work in the lab, we use our 'noses' to tell you what you've made, and somehow we're supposed to put it all together."

"I never thought about it that way," Raf said. That was just the business: people like him could develop the raw emotions, either extracting them from organics or synthesizing them chemically, but they needed testers like her to balance them, give them the subtlety real human feelings had.

"Well, you're not trained to," she said. "They teach you to think and expect us to feel. I mean, you study emotions for years—how often do they tell you to *feel* them?"

"We're not supposed to—" he stammered.

Naomi held up a hand. "I know, I know—and we're not supposed to know how the technical end works. I have to twist arms just to get you labcoats to talk to me."

Raf smiled weakly. "You don't have to twist my arm," he said.

She reached out, touched his arm lightly. "No, I don't, do I?" she said. "Guess I'm lucky I got to you before they ruined you. While you're still able to feel."

They had been leaning close to hear one another over the crowd; suddenly Raf realized how near her face was to his. "I, I guess," he said, desperately thinking of ways to keep the conversation from ending. "So what are you working on now?"

Her eyes lit up once again, and he knew then that he would do anything to be able to see that spark every day. "We just started testing a new juice: working name's Blue Ribbon. The top note's an expectation-actuality mix, then an absolute of adrenaline, and a touch of runner's high for the dry-out. The idea is that all together they make a feeling of accomplishment, like when you do something important."

"That sounds sort of baroque," he said.

Her face darkened. "Well, it is my job," she said.

"No, no—I just mean it seems like a pretty complicated emotion to have to simulate—I guess Prospero's patients deserve the whole spectrum, though."

"Oh," she said, laughed. He wondered if he would ever get used to the way her moods changed from dark to light and back again, in the space of moments; part and parcel of being a tester, he supposed, to feel everything so strongly. "It's not for therapeutic use. I don't really handle that stuff."

"I didn't know Milne did recreationals."

"We don't sell them, we make them and contract to secondary ven-

dors. That's the bulk of our business, though we don't make a lot of noise about it. You've probably felt a few—ever dream *Risk Factor*?"

He nodded. It was a classic: the adrenaline from the final escape, surfing the avalanche, had left him rattled the whole next day. "Sure."

"That was Epiphany. One of mine."

"Wow," he said. "I didn't even know—"

"It was enhanced? That's the idea."

The lights overhead flashed twice: the next lecture was about to start. "I, I guess we should go back in," Raf said.

Naomi gave a small, sly smile. "Do you want to?"

Raf glanced at the people shuffling back into the lecture hall. "No," he said, his heart beating faster. "Not really."

"Come on, then," she said. Her eyes flashed again. "Let's go live a little."

Raf keyed RECORD on his clipboard, spoke into the mike set in the top left corner. "Clinical trial of Alpha six, April seventh."

On the other side of the glass three men and two women sat at a white counter. For recreationals—the bulk of his work—they used testers, but for anything therapeutic a blind study was needed to get FDEA approval. In front of each of the subjects was an inset mike and a green button: each of them had been instructed to press the button if they wanted anything, though without the juice the concept of "wanting" was entirely abstract to them.

There had been eight ingredients on the touche that had started it all: a combination of amino acids, monoamines, peptides, and hormones that somehow added up to anger, fear, and desire. Each of the Alpha series had a slightly different mix, in hopes of finding one where the desire predominated. So far there had only been two in which it had been present at all.

"Starting drip, Alpha Six," Jeremy's voice said behind him. He had a postage-stamp degree and looked like he slept in his car, but Jeremy did his job well enough.

Raf kept an eye on the five subjects sitting at the counter. They had the empty stares characteristic of Prospero's patients; each of them had been trained to blink six times a minute to moisten their eyes, creating a sight-echo that disturbed him whenever he saw two or more of them together.

Suddenly number one reached out, pressed the green button. "Does this work?" his voice said over the intercom, panicked.

Raf pressed the TALK button. "Yes, it does," he said, his stomach fluttering. "What can I do for you?"

"Uh, can I get a sandwich?"

Raf lifted his hand, palm turned behind him, and Jeremy high-fived it perfunctorily. "Sure. What kind do you want?"

"Um—I guess—" Number one's breathing began to get ragged, his jaw stiffening.

"His readings just jumped," Jeremy said.

"Never mind. Just get me out of here," the subject said in a rising pitch.

"Hang on," Raf said. If he took any of them out it ended the session, and so far only one had responded to this mix.

"Check out number four," Jeremy said quietly.

Raf turned to see the man second from the right flexing and unflexing his fingers, then drumming them against the counter in increasing anxiety. He was fidgeting in his seat, too, trying to move further away from number five without getting closer to number three. That being impossible, he gave number five a shove. Number five's eyes flashed with fear as she fell to the ground.

"I'm shutting it down," Jeremy said.

"Okay." He shook his head. "We've got it. That's two different mixes where we have clear desire. We just need to find the right balance—get the negatives lower, the fear especially."

Jeremy had stopped the drip, given the subjects a cleanser to flush out the longer-lasting hormones and peptides, and they were reverting to their former state; even number five, who had been pushed off her seat by number four, showed no interest in getting back up. "We need it," he said. "The two juices with desire were the ones where the negatives were strongest."

Raf shut his eyes, tried not to remember the look on Naomi's face when she had fallen off her chair. "We'll find the balance," he said. "We've got what we need. Now it's just a technical problem."

"Ladies and gentlemen, Milne Neuro-T is proud to present its signature emotion for the coming season—from designers Raphael Parnati and Naomi Martin—Go!"

Beaming, Raf looked over at Naomi, saw the grin tight on her face. He raised an eyebrow, trying to catch her eye; when he did, she shot him a glance that said *not now*.

Below the long stage, Milne employees were handing out touches with samples of the new product to journalists and dreamcasters. Evan Meyer, the lab's director, was fielding questions, tossed a few to Raf; perhaps sensing Naomi's mood, he left her alone. When the press conference broke up, he put a hand on Raf's shoulder.

"A little more enthusiasm from you two would help," Meyer said quietly. He was a big man, with a build like a grizzly, brown hair curled tight against his head. "You're the stars, remember."

"Sorry, Evan," Raf said. Naomi had already stood up and left the stage. "She's probably just tired. I'll talk to her about it."

Meyer nodded, clearly relieved; being stern did not come naturally to him. "Everything all right with you two?"

"Sure, sure. Why, are you going to tell me business and pleasure don't mix?"

"I might," Meyer said, laughed. "But then, I used to say designers and testers didn't mix, so what do I know?"

Raf found Naomi backstage, drinking a coffee. There was no doubt she was tired: work on Go had been more than usually frantic near the end, and the closer they got to deadline the more the balance of work weighed on her. "You all right?" he asked.

She took a sip from her coffee, bit the cup lightly and worried at the styrofoam. "Yeah. Sure. Just your basic fatigue plus your basic work anxiety."

"Come on, did you hear the buzz out there? Go is a solid hit."

She spat the plastic fragment she had chewed off her cup onto the floor. "God, you even talk like one of them now."

"I don't mean it like that," Raf said, feeling himself flushing: *them* was the word they always used to describe the suits, the marketing people, the ones who had said testers and designers shouldn't work together. The ones they had proven wrong. "I just mean we've got nothing to be anxious about. Sure there's pressure, topping ourselves every time—"

"Topping ourselves? Is that what you think we've been doing?"

Raf forced himself to hold in his first response. Now that he knew what this was about, he also knew there was no settling it. Their first project together, Mono No Aware, was still Naomi's favorite: a delicate mix of awe and sadness inspired by Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, it was the juice that had proved a tester and designer working together could produce emotions of unheard-of subtlety and power. While it had been a critical success, though, Mono No Aware had not sold well, and Raf and Naomi, though given greater resources and liberties, had been steered into more profitable areas.

"Yes," Raf said, keeping his voice low to be unheard by the stagehands and gofers passing by. "You know we have. Go is a lot simpler, a lot cleaner than Overdrive." In fact Overdrive was the one he was most proud of, an emotion that had previously only existed in fiction—that last burst of determination a superhero uses to overcome his foe. Technically, though, there was no doubt Go was more accomplished, achieving its effect with just fourteen ingredients where Overdrive had needed twenty-three. "Anyway, all of this was following your lead. You knew the business a lot better than me."

Naomi took another sip of coffee, frowned, put down the cup. "You're right," she said. "You know what? I picked up *Tale of Genji* the other day, re-read the most touching parts." She shrugged. "Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at him—right at him, for the first time since they had started talking—but the fire he had hoped for was not in her eyes. "I mean I felt nothing, not even a memory of the feeling we wanted MNA to reproduce. So I took a dose and there it was, every cherry blossom about to fall breaking my heart; but, without the juice, nothing."

He reached out to hold her, drew her close. "It's okay," he said. "You were right the first time. You're just tired."

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe—maybe we should take a vacation. Go somewhere, do something real."

"Sure." Raf closed his eyes, felt her warmth in his arms, her head leaning against his shoulder. "Something real. Sounds nice."

Solvents in the air burned Raf's nose as the security door slid open. He had not been in an extraction lab in years, but the smell still brought him instantly back to the seventeen hours a day he used to spend distilling an absolute of aggression from the brains of Siamese fighting fish. It took a hundred kilograms of cloned fish brains to make a liter of absolute, a long process whose every step required human supervision.

"Raf!" a voice called. "It's been a long time since we've seen you down here."

He turned to see Mireille Theroux, the head of the facility, heading down the walkway toward him. She had been on the same team he had, as grad students, but had taken the hard-tech route, eventually winding up in charge of distillation and extraction at Milne. She was a short, dark-haired woman who always managed to look perfectly put-together despite being surrounded by caustic chemicals, replacing the standard lab coat with an immaculate white suit and a pair of Chanel glasses. Somehow, the smell of her perfume rose over the chemicals in the air.

"I guess it has," he said, awkwardly kissing her on each cheek when she reached him.

"But of course, you have your own lab now, with little phials and vials of everything," she said. "What could lure you down here to the belly of the beast?" That had been their name for it: the place where enzymes extracted emotions from chemicals, the way the stomach turns chocolate into happiness.

"It's this new juice I'm working on. I get the reaction I want when I mix the ingredients a certain way—"

"How many ingredients?"

"Eight."

She rolled her eyes. "Raf, you purist, you! You're going to put me out of business."

He laughed politely. "Well, that's the thing—I've tried mixing them every way I could, and I can't boost the reaction I want without making the side effects worse too. I know there isn't anything in my lab that'll help, but I thought maybe you might have something new. . . ."

She nodded. "Of course. Ask and you shall receive. What sort of thing were you looking for?"

"Anything," he said, shrugged. As scientific as the process was at the extraction stage, by this point it was closer to alchemy: the right mix of anger and sorrow could create a euphoria more genuine than a pure essence of happiness. The use of testers had always been a tacit admission of that, but it had taken him and Naomi to bring it out into the open.

"Very well," she said, leading him along the walkway, between two of the huge stainless-steel extraction vats, to a sampling station. A hinged plastic box attached to the wall was full of touches, like little pipettes; above it was a programmable dispenser to which thin pipes led from the extraction vats. "Try this—an essence of doubt."

Raf plugged the touche into his dreamlink and felt a gray wash of uncertainty cross over him. Within a moment he doubted his name, his purpose, his very existence. A few seconds later the feeling was gone and he had regained confidence in his solidity.

"Well?" Mireille asked.

Raf shook his head. "It's good, but it's not what I need. Also, I think what I'm looking for is going to be an absolute—it has to root the emotion, ground it."

"Hm." She chewed her lip briefly. "Try this one, then."

Another touche, and—nothing; he frowned, then checked his watch, wondering when he would have time to eat lunch. Another moment passed. "Well?"

"You're not feeling anything?"

"Just hungry," he said, then smiled as it dawned on him. "That's very good. Good *persistance*, too—I'm still feeling it. But who's going to buy it?"

"Oh, you know those hardcore dreamers—the highlights aren't enough; they want to sleep, eat, everything along the way to the dragon's cave, or whatever."

In fact he had not heard about this latest trend, not having followed dream fashion for a while. "Sleep? They dream about sleeping?"

She shrugged, spread her hands in a what-can-you-do expression. "Not my problem. Anyway, it made me curious, and it turned out nobody had ever extracted it before: an absolute of hunger. Do you like it?"

"Of course. But I—" He was about to say it wasn't what he needed, but paused. Something about it was with him still, a primal desire he suspected even the cleanser would not entirely wipe out. "Actually, send me a sample. I'd like to play with it."

Mireille smiled. "Eh bien. But please, don't let it be so long before we see each other again."

Raf nodded. He had not socialized at all since Naomi developed Prospero's; he had decided to keep her condition private, and most of their friends probably thought he had dropped off the face of the earth. "Sure," he said, giving the awkward cheek-kisses once more and starting down the walkway.

"And say hello to Naomi for me," Mireille called at his back. "Tell her she still owes me a boyfriend."

"Doctor Parnati, please—sit." Afternoon light fell through the office window at a painful angle, making Raf squint. Doctor Hamilton—MD, not PhD; a real doctor, his mother would say—gestured to the chair in front of her desk. She was a woman with a brisk manner, dark hair pulled tight in a ponytail, and young. Nearly all doctors who specialized in organic emotion disorders were. It was a young discipline.

"Shouldn't Naomi be here?"

Dr. Hamilton gave a professional smile. "In cases like these I like to talk to the caregiver first. I assume that's you?" She gestured at the chair again.

Raf remained standing, put his hands on the back of the chair. "What do you mean, 'caregiver'? What exactly is wrong with her?"

Her expression turned into a little moue of concern. "I'm afraid Naomi is in the early stages of Prospero's disease," she said.

"That can't be. She's not even thirty-five, and she's not a habitual dreamer."

She sighed. "That is the classic model of Prospero's, yes. But—I know you're in the field; have you been keeping up with the literature?"

"I guess not."

"Lately we're finding more young victims, more sudden onset—people in the industry, often. The people who make good testers—"

Raf nodded. "Feel things more. So they're affected more easily."

"That's the theory," Dr. Hamilton said.

"So what can we do?"

"Like I said, you're in the field— you know the treatments." She reached into the middle drawer of her desk, drew out a colorful pamphlet titled CARING FOR THE PROSPERO'S PATIENT. "Training, at first, then emotifiers. Low dosage, so we don't aggravate her condition. It's a big improvement on the early treatments." He remembered those from school: the Koch-Bosshard robot faces that mimicked emotions in a cartoonish way.

"Will it get worse?" he asked.

"I can't say. The progress might arrest itself. . . ."

"Or it might not. I can make her happy, or sad, but she's never going to feel . . . anything herself. Never want anything for herself."

"I'm afraid that's right, at the moment. But Doctor Parnati, you know, there's a lot of work going into finding a cure. Your own company. . . ."

He did not tell her that Milne, like all the other companies, had more or less given up. Recreationals were much more profitable; what little therapeutic work they still did was mostly to preserve a cover of respectability, and it was all in the area of treatment, not cure. "Sure," he said, turned to leave. "I guess I'll— I'll go get Naomi now."

"Doctor Parnati—"

He stopped but did not turn around. "Yes?"

"She's going to understand what's happened to her, but she's unlikely to *care*. That may be difficult for you."

Raf nodded. "I understand."

"Caring for someone with Prospero's can be very stressful. We have a support group—"

"Thanks," he said, and left the office without getting any more information. He didn't need a support group; he was going to find a cure. He wouldn't be able to work on it at Milne—it certainly wouldn't pass the cost-benefit test the new CEO required—but one of the smaller firms might let him do it, just for the prestige of having Milne's star designer on staff.

"I'll wake you up," he said quietly as he left. "I'll find a way. I promise."

"Can I speak to you for a moment, Doctor?"

Raf shifted his focus on the one-way glass, turning his attention away from the empty table on the other side to the half-reflection of the room. Mark Davis, head of research at Laboratorios Nullorca, was standing in the doorway.

"Okay," he said. "What's up?"

"I understand you've put clinical testing of Impulse on hold?"

It took Raf a moment to recognize the trade name that Marketing had developed for the juice he still thought of as Beta one. "There're still some bugs to work out," he said, avoiding the shorter man's eyes.

"This product means a lot to the company," Davis said, his tone even. "I must admit, I was starting to wonder if this line of research was going to produce anything at all."

Raf shrugged. "Slow and steady wins the race," he said.

Davis smiled, an expression all the more disturbing for its rarity. "Maybe at Milne," he said. "At Nullorca we bet on the rabbit."

"Right." Raf laughed politely. "Look, it's not going to be much longer. We've got the effect we wanted; at this stage it's just tinkering."

"Even if it's just for short term use, this product could have tremendous therapeutic value," Davis said. "Do you think it's fair to hold it back over a few minor concerns?"

Raf nodded, acknowledging defeat. "I guess not," he said slowly. "How much time do I have?"

"Shall we say a week?"

"Fine."

Davis left, his unspoken question a *sillage* lingering in the air. Raf wished he could dispel it, but in fact he had been asking the same thing himself: why was he stalling? What was he more afraid of—that it wouldn't work, or that it would? He knew how excited he had felt when he had first added the new absolute of hunger to the juice, found that it nearly washed out the anger and fear; still, something was gnawing at him, some anxiety he could not isolate and identify. If only he could be sure he was doing the right thing.

He shook his head at his own stupidity, then hooked himself up to the dispenser and keyed for the beta juice. A wave of nearly pure desire rose in him, washing away all doubt. *This*, he thought, *will definitely have commercial applications*. Carried by the rush of will, he quickly arranged to have Naomi—subject five, he barely remembered to say—brought to the testing lab.

She found a chair, sat still while Raf hooked the dreamlink to her. He stepped out the door, went into the lab to start the drip, then returned to be with her when the juice took effect. As before, Naomi's face briefly went rigid with anger, then fear; this time, though, her expression smoothed into calm after a few moments.

"Raf?" she asked. "What—what am I feeling?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes," she said, then stopped as she heard herself. "I do—I *want* to know."

Holding his breath, he pulled his chair over to hers, leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek. She looked at him for a long moment, kissed him. His heart jumped; he looked into her eyes, saw that spark.

"I wanted to do that," Naomi said. "Raf, I'm—" She stopped for a moment. "I'm really *hungry*."

"Side effect," Raf said, wiping his eyes. "I think we can live with it. How about a hot dog?"

"Sounds great," Naomi said. "I'd love a hot dog right now."

"I'll just have to sign you out, then we can go. To the park." He stood, let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Or we could do Chinese, if you like."

"Chinese!" Naomi said, her eyes flashing. "That's perfect. Let's do that."

"Um . . . okay. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." She closed her eyes, smiled. "I would kill for some pork buns."

"Yeah. Me too." A tiny part of Raf's brain was screaming, getting louder and louder as the effects of the dose he had taken faded. "How about pizza?"

"Pizza is perfect!" Naomi said, with exactly as much enthusiasm as she had shown before. "Onions, olives, green peppers, bacon . . ."

Raf felt himself shaking, fought to keep a tremor from his voice. "Do you want to just go to the caf here?"

"Sure! Great! I haven't had one of those Swedish meatball platters in forever."

"That's because you hate them," Raf said quietly.

"That's why," Naomi said. "They're so bad they're good."

"Uh huh." He felt oddly light, like a cartoon character who's run off a cliff, in the moment before he starts to drop. "How about we just bang our heads into the wall?"

"Sure!" Naomi jumped to her feet.

Raf caught her arm. "Do you really want to do that?" he asked. She nodded vigorously. "Why?"

"It feels so good when you stop."

"Let's not do it," he said.

"Okay. Let's not." She smiled. "So what do you want to do?"

"What do *you* want to do?" Raf asked, making a silent wish.

Naomi shrugged, excitement dancing in her eyes. "Anything. Everything."

"Okay," Raf said. He made himself smile, then kissed her again, felt her kiss back for the first time in three years; when he looked in her eyes, though, it wasn't really her spark he saw. Just neon that he'd thought was lightning.

The noon sun shone high above, making Raf squint. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been under natural light this long. His skin, always pale, had turned nearly translucent from years under fluorescents, and before going out he had been careful to cover up. In this, he and Naomi were alike: neither could feel the harm until after it was done.

He thought, for a moment, of Davis' desk, back at the office, and the two things on it—his resignation and his report on the clinical trial, stating that Impulse would be both unsafe and, more damningly, unprofitable. He took a deep breath: under the notes of damp earth and spring flowers, he could just make out the smell of bridges burning.

Naomi settled into the bench overlooking the pond and he sat down next to her. The park—their park, the one they had fled to from the conference the day they first met—had hardly changed over the years: kids still squealed as they slid down the slides, hot dog vendors still circled it, occasionally daring the bylaw officers by rolling their carts inside its boundaries. It was easy to believe no time had passed since the first day they came here. That nothing had changed.

He kissed her cheek, and it felt like wax; her eyes were dead and empty. He had taken her off the emotifiers, all of them, left dreams behind and brought her back out into the world. If a cure ever came, it would come from her.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," he said, and kissed her again.

One day, damn it, it would work. ○

THE ANALECTS OF DECOMPRECIUS

Translated by Wil McCarthy

1. The master said, the airlock is a place for contemplation. To discuss your task beforehand is good. To discuss your errors afterward is good. To chatter is disrespectful.
When the red lamp is extinguished, the outer hatch may be opened.
When the green lamp is burning, the inner hatch.
If the lamps remain dark, repair them.
2. The master said, decompress for fifteen minutes in a majority nitrogen atmosphere. Decompress for ten minutes in a majority noble atmosphere, and for five minutes in a majority oxygen atmosphere.
3. The master told his students, linearly interpolate. He said, are you fools or spacemen?
4. There are some who decompress for thirty or even forty minutes, as if their time did not have value. Eschew this.
5. The master said, the air grows on trees! It isn't free!
Truly sublime are the words of the men of Apollo, for they are calm.
6. Said the student, my atmosphere is pure oxygen. Since there is nothing to bubble in my blood, shall I open the hatch? Replied the master, has it been five minutes?
7. Prebreathing is acceptable. Decompress anyway.
8. The master remarked, the inside and the outside are different places. In between them you must cleanse your mind. This is the true purpose of decompression.
Do not fill the airwaves with prattle. Remember that the bandwidth of free space is limited.
9. The master said, the working of valves should be attended with respect. Remember that systems can fail.
Let the airlock be your favorite place. Do not imagine you are elsewhere.
10. Obviously, your face will itch when you cannot scratch it. Said the master, are you a spaceman or aren't you?

Our June issue seems to be almost a special multi-media issue. James Patrick Kelly's story investigated a brand new medium, while Robert Reed reflected on a familiar entertainment form that regularly invades the average living room. Now Ian Creasey, whose first story for *Asimov's*—"The Hastillan Weed"—appeared in our February 2006 issue, examines a fairly recent phenomenon that has swallowed the lives of many Internet users, and takes a look at where it's going and what it may lead to when it reaches . . .

THE EDGE OF THE MAP

Ian Creasey

Susanna listened resentfully to the helicopters spraying nanocams over the foothills. She kept her gaze locked on the plantation, rubbing her tense neck as she waited to get the shot. It was a long time since she'd filmed her own footage. She fiddled with the controls on her ancient glasses, practicing framing the scene, zooming in, panning back for a wide angle.

"How long will this take?" asked Ivo. "This isn't what I'm here for. We need to head off soon." In her peripheral vision, she saw him twitch restlessly as he kept glancing in all directions, like a nervous bird in a garden full of cats.

"I want to film a few things before I'm finally obsolete," Susanna said. "It shouldn't be long now." She saw no sign of movement downhill. The cannabis plants, which had grown four meters tall in the African sun, might still harbor a few defiant hippies. Should she move along the ridge for a better angle?

A bar of green light split the sky in two. The *crack* of ionized air rolled across the mountain like a manmade thunderbolt. Susanna adjusted her glasses, zooming in to focus on the flames. The smell of burning cannabis rose up the hillside.

She gave the glasses to Ivo, then walked a few steps down the hill. "Keep looking at me, but film as much fire behind me as you can."

Ivo donned the glasses with little enthusiasm. He brushed aside the fringe of his ash-blond hair, then gave her a perfunctory thumbs-up sign.

Susanna stood up straight, took two deep breaths, and raised her voice over the crackle of flames. "As the Blind Spot shrinks, more secrets are revealed." Another *zap* echoed around the hills. "When the nanocams found a drugs plantation, American satellites fried it."

A gust of wind fanned aromatic smoke toward her, and Susanna suppressed a tickle in her throat. She wiped her brow with a sponsored sweatband. "I can smell the burning from here. With the sun and the fire and the lasers from the sky, I'm roasting like an ant under a magnifying glass." She included these sensory details to emphasize that she reported from the spot, unlike all the bloggers who'd comment on the nanocam footage from the comfort of their own homes.

"In the last few days, soldiers have arrested dozens of terrorists as soon as the cams spotted them. But who else—and what else—is still out there?" She left a dramatic pause before signing off. "This is Susanna Munro reporting from Zaire."

Now she let herself cough volcanically. Her eyes watering, she stumbled up the bare slope, following Ivo to his battered Land Rover.

The vehicle, parked in the shade of a huge rock, was a blessed harbor from the heat and smoke. Ivo started the engine and turned up the air-conditioning, then returned her glasses with a grimace of distaste.

"Thanks," said Susanna, smiling. "They won't bite you."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Ivo said, and she felt that he only barely refrained from adding "old chap." Despite the heat, he wore a formal shirt and waistcoat as if he were starring in a twentieth century movie about a nineteenth century explorer.

Susanna played the recording. The obsolete glasses pixellated the image on zoom shots, and Ivo had jiggled his head while filming her. But the segment was usable. Watching her spiel, she winced at the sight of her grey hair. The last time she had used these glasses—or their backup system—her hair had been Pre-Raphaelite red. And in those days, simple moisturizer had kept wrinkles at bay. Throughout the past week she had felt the tropical sun beating through her high-factor sunblock, scouring crevasses in her skin, tanning it like old leather.

But that hardly mattered now. There would be no more stories after this one, no more dispatches from the field. The advancing nanocams made images accessible to everyone, and frontline journalism redundant.

A black helicopter roared overhead, spraying its invisible cargo. Inside the Land Rover, both their comps beeped to signal Net access. Susanna plugged in her glasses, uploading all the footage recorded this morning and last night—when the doomed hippies had got high for the last time, vowing that the Man could have their joints when he pried them from their cold dead hands. She sent the update to various channels she freelanced for, then began scanning her mail.

Ivo interrupted. "That's where we're going," he said, pointing to a map on his laptop screen. An overlay showed nanocam coverage at 98 percent,

and the Blind Spot shrank by a few more pixels as she stared. "Are you ready?" he asked. "Forward, forward, let us range."

Susanna hesitated, thinking of the desperate criminals who could still be out there, hiding from the advancing cameras. If she met them, she might be giving them their last chance to commit rape, torture, murder.

And yet this was her last chance too, her last opportunity for an old-fashioned scoop, here in the continent where scoops began when New York *Herald* reporter Henry Stanley said, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

She nodded. "Let's go."

Ivo revved the engine, and the Land Rover shot forward into the glare of the sun. Susanna's comp chirped indignation as they left the Net behind and re-entered the Blind Spot. She read the mail she'd downloaded. Her husband had sent a Happy Birthday message, in case she stayed out here another week. Her daughters were baking cookies—chocolate for Michelle, and almond for Vanessa. In the background, the kitchen looked like chaos, as always, and she saw Toby scooping chocolate dough from an abandoned mixing bowl.

Susanna took off her glasses and put them in the pocket of her once-white blouse, now stained with sweat and smoke and dust. The children, she thought. The children were one reason she had stopped chasing stories across the globe. But it wasn't just that. It had seemed a promotion to become the anchorwoman in the studio, to become an armchair pundit filing expert opinions from home. And yet, as the nanocams spread, everyone became a pundit. Anyone could bookmark footage and post comments, edit montages and record a voiceover. Susanna had once been proud to call herself a journalist, but the label meant nothing now.

Well, the bloggers weren't out here, breathing the parched air, clutching a broken seat belt as the Land Rover bumped over stones and fallen branches. There was hardly any trail, just a network of goat tracks and dry stream beds. Ivo zigzagged up the mountain, leaving the contour-hugging helicopter behind. The nanocams could only advance slowly and methodically, needing to knit together in a network. From their inception as an anti-terrorist measure in the USA, they had spread remorselessly across the world. War and disease had kept this remote corner of Africa clear, a haven for the hunted, but now the last Blind Spot would disappear—Ivo's laptop predicted—in less than two days.

She watched Ivo drive. Every few minutes he turned his head for a sudden glance out of the side window, as though trying to catch something by surprise.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"We've been through this already," he said. "I'm not telling you what could be out there. The power of suggestion might make you imagine anything I mentioned. I'm bringing you because I need an independent pair of eyes. You're the journalist—shouldn't you see for yourself?"

Susanna thought of pressing him, but decided to wait. Sometimes silence created its own pressure. People gripped by an obsession—and Ivo's had brought him to the remotest corner of the Earth—could rarely shut up for long.

But he didn't speak again until the Land Rover crunched to a halt. Su-

sanna hopped out and helped Ivo heave a dead shrub from their path. She swallowed hard, trying to relieve the pain in her left ear. They had climbed many hundreds of meters, but even in the thin air, the midday sun still broiled the landscape. The rocky hillside, pockmarked with tufts of dry grass, felt hot through her shoes, as if the long-extinct volcano plotted a comeback.

Ivo said, "Can you see anything?"

She paused and looked around. Bar the Land Rover, she saw no sign of human presence. The only movement came from a single bee darting between small purple flowers.

"Can you see anything in the corner of your eye?" Ivo asked. "Can you feel anything brushing past you—running from the nanocams like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing?" He spoke with the intensity of a true believer, though she still hadn't figured out precisely what he believed in.

"Maybe you inhaled too much of that burning dope," said Susanna. She hoped this might sting him into saying more, but he only shrugged and joined her back in the Land Rover.

They crawled on, stopping more frequently as the slope grew rugged. Eventually a huge jumble of boulders halted their progress.

"From here, we walk," said Ivo.

Susanna rummaged in her holdall. "Coke?" she offered.

Ivo stared in disbelief. "Where did you get this? There's not a bar or a vending machine in two hundred kilometers." When he opened the can, froth spurted out and soaked him with cola.

They both laughed. "Sorry," said Susanna. "I guess we're pretty high up. And you just wasted about a hundred dollars worth of Coke, by the way. Some guy airlifted it all in and charged me one thousand dollars for a six-pack." She tried to ease open her own can, and relieve the pressure gradually, but she only succeeded in spraying foam out of the window. Bubbles hissed as they fell on the Land Rover's sun-heated metal.

"Unless the forex markets just exploded, that's a lot of money for Coke." Ivo wagged a finger in mock disdain. "And it's not even chilled!"

"Yeah. . . ." She sighed. "It was my little nostalgia trip. Back in the old days, when there were dozens of reporters chasing every story, we used to compete to see who could get the most outrageous item through expenses." She remembered Pink-Slip Pete, the BBC veteran who'd mentored her through early assignments. He would have applauded the thousand-dollar Coke, and topped it with some ludicrously expensive taxi or mini-bar tab. Pete had died before the newsroom started sourcing all their pictures from the nanocams.

Ivo clinked his can with hers. "Cheers." He started checking the contents of his rucksack. "Are you going to hump your bag up the rest of the hill?" he asked.

Susanna frowned. "How far is it?"

"The more you carry, the farther it'll feel."

She hefted the holdall, which contained exactly what she used to pack in the old days. "I'll give it my best shot."

"Fair enough." Ivo pointed to her blouse pocket. "But you're leaving those behind."

Susanna pulled out the thick-framed glasses. "These? Why?"

"Because they're a camera. Okay, they're not the nanocams, but they're a camera nonetheless. Why do you think I'm here in the Blind Spot?"

"I don't know. You won't tell me what you're looking for."

"No . . . but the reason I'm looking *here* is that there are no cameras. Not yet, anyway." Ivo looked up, as if to check for helicopters, but silence shrouded the mountain. "And that's why you can't bring your glasses."

"But I'm a journalist," Susanna said. "When I find the story, I need to film it."

"Ah, but what I'm looking for can't be filmed."

She turned to stare at him. "Run that by me again."

Ivo drained his can of warm Coke. "In ancient times," he began, "when people made maps, they wrote 'Here Be Dragons' at the edge, and drew sea-monsters in the ocean. Over the centuries the dragons got pushed back and back.

"Even in the scientific era, people still saw strange sights. Giant apes, rains of frogs, lights in the sky, fairies at the bottom of the garden. All sorts of stuff, but with one thing in common—they didn't show up too well on film. When the nanocams blanketed North America, you didn't hear much about Bigfoot any more.

"So there are two possibilities. Anyone who ever saw anything weird was mistaken or lying—or all those weird things retreated from the cameras, just as expanding civilization has always made wildlife retreat."

"Or die out," Susanna said.

"Cheery soul, aren't you?" said Ivo. "Yes, many creatures have died out. But wildlife isn't all extinct. And there were so many different weird things, they can't all have died, just as those witnesses can't all have been wrong."

"So we're looking for Bigfoot?" she said, pleased to have finally winkled out Ivo's obsession, and a little amused by it.

He shook his head. "I knew I shouldn't have mentioned anything specific. No, unless Bigfoot managed to swim all the way across the Atlantic, it seems unlikely he's here—if he ever existed. The same applies to most of what used to be called the unexplained, before the nanocams showed exactly how rains of frogs occurred.

"But if there's anything left, if there's just one single weird thing left in the world, it's right here. The nanocams have driven it back and back, and now the Blind Spot is the edge of the Earth. And that's why you can't bring your camera-glasses. The weird is like a superimposed state in quantum mechanics—when you record it, you destroy it." He said the last sentence as if it made sense.

"So you invited a journalist along, and now you're asking her to leave her camera behind?"

"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen—but what if it can *only* blush unseen by mechanical eyes?"

"Then I wonder what it has to hide." Yet Susanna felt sympathetic to Ivo's bizarre request. Journalism wasn't just about taking pictures, otherwise she could have stayed home and let the nanocams get the footage. Journalism was about being on the spot, talking to the locals, getting the

real story rather than just a picture of it. Yes, she could leave her glasses behind.

After all, she still had her backup system.

"Okay," she said, putting her glasses into the Land Rover's glove compartment. "Let's go."

They clambered over the boulders that had blocked the vehicle's ascent, and then began trudging the rest of the way up the mountain. Susanna kept transferring her holdall from one shoulder to the other, in ever-diminishing intervals as the weight grew harder to bear. She wanted to rush to the top, to get the climb over with, but found herself panting for breath in the thin air. She felt dizzy, and saw black spots floating in her vision.

Were they what Ivo was looking for? When she asked, he smiled and shook his head. "You're just trying too hard, using too much energy. It's easier if you take small steps." He demonstrated walking with tiny heel-toe steps that Susanna remembered from childhood games.

"Let's catch a yeti, hitch a ride," she said.

Ivo disdained to reply, and climbed onward. She followed him, grateful for the nanobots maintaining her osteoporosis-stricken bones. The sun descended the empty sky.

Susanna only noticed that Ivo had stopped when she bumped into him. "Take a rest," he said. "From here it's easier."

They'd reached the rim of the ancient volcano. Before them a vast lake stretched as far as Susanna could see. She sat on her holdall, too tired to even speak. Ivo, ten years younger, looked just as glad to take a breather. She watched him staring out into the lake, and wondered what he had expected to find. Only wind-blown ripples broke the surface.

They couldn't afford to rest long; the sun hung low, with twilight brief in the tropics. Ivo led them round the shore of the lake, crunching grey sand underfoot. Ahead stood a small hut, built from mortarless stones and roofed with reeds.

"I scouted out a few places," Ivo explained. "When the nanocams began their final push, I didn't know exactly where the last Blind Spot would be, but I thought the lake was a likely spot." He paused. "Um . . . you might want to wait here for a minute."

Ivo approached the doorway cautiously, and Susanna remembered that terrorists might be hiding beyond. But he gave her a reassuring wave, and she joined him inside.

A few folding chairs surrounded a picnic table full of moldy Styrofoam cups and empty packets of rolling papers. "Some of the hippies used to come up here for the fishing," Ivo said. "They had lots of stories about the things that got away."

Susanna thought he referred to drug-inspired tales, until she realized that he meant *weird* things. What monsters might be wandering outside the stone walls? Was it safe up here?

The hell with it, she thought. Bigfoot could scare off the terrorists—or vice versa. She was too tired to worry. She looked for a bed, but saw only a pile of dry reeds. From her holdall she took some spare clothes for a pillow.

"Good thinking," said Ivo. "We need to start early tomorrow, to beat the helicopters."

If he said anything else, Susanna didn't hear it before she fell asleep.

In the morning they walked further round the lake to a stretch of tall reeds growing in the shallows. A thin layer of cloud veiled the sun, but did little to restrain its heat from baking the landscape.

Ivo splashed through the reeds until he shouted in triumph. Susanna stepped into the water—finding it colder than she expected—and joined Ivo as he heaved aside a faded tarpaulin. Underneath bobbed a motorboat, its off-white interior colonized by nesting spiders. Susanna threw in her holdall and clambered onto a bench, brushing arachnids aside. *Oh, the joys of location reporting.* She towed off her wet feet while Ivo struggled to start the engine.

The boat roared into the lake, flattening reeds on its way. Ivo throttled back to a gentler pace. He kept glancing from port to starboard, bow to stern. Susanna saw only birds wading near the shore, taking to the air when the boat came too close.

She looked away from the shore, out into the lake. Beyond the boat's wake, the still water reflected the sky. She barely saw any boundary between them. No farther shore darkened the horizon.

Susanna blinked, and peered into the distance. She still couldn't see anything.

"How big is this lake?" she asked.

Ivo shrugged. "I haven't been round it."

"I thought we were in a volcano crater. Shouldn't we be able to see the other side?"

"I'll check the map." Ivo delved into his rucksack. But when he tried to boot up the laptop, nothing happened. He shook his head. "Batteries must have run out. They don't last long out here."

"You don't have any spares?"

"Sure, back in the Land Rover."

Ivo looked more excited than concerned. "Let's get across and have a look," he said, revving the boat like a boy racer.

Susanna glanced back and watched the hut dwindle into an imperceptible speck. The loss of her only landmark disturbed her on a visceral level.

You wanted to chase a story, she reminded herself. In the old days she'd survived dozens of disturbing moments. Back then she had almost relished being scared, because the most uncomfortable stories sometimes turned out to be the best.

In those days, of course, she didn't have a family waiting back home.

The engine cut out.

"Shit!" said Ivo. He yanked the starter. The engine coughed and grunted, but wouldn't fire. "We must be out of gas. Stupid hippies! They promised me there was loads left."

Susanna bent down to peer under her bench. She rejoiced at the sight of a red canister, but when she grabbed it, she could feel it was empty.

Below the other bench, Ivo retrieved two long paddles. "I guess this is the emergency engine."

"It's a long time since I did any canoeing," said Susanna. *Or anything much*, she thought.

The motorboat was no canoe. Susanna found the benches uncomfort-

ably placed for paddling, as did Ivo. Nevertheless, after several minutes of splashing and swearing, they found they could move the boat if they had to. This made Susanna feel a little better, though she reflected that the few minutes the engine had driven them out would take a whole lot longer to paddle back.

And where was "back," exactly? In struggling to coordinate their paddling, they'd spun the boat so many times that Susanna had no idea which way they'd come.

All directions looked the same, an expanse of water stretching to the hazy sky. The heat made her scalp itch with sweat. She opened a Coke and swigged the whole can.

"Laptop down; engine stopped," she said. "Do you reckon gremlins did it? Are they part of the weird?" She wanted to bait him, to get him to talk about what he was looking for.

"If gremlins existed, they'd sabotage the nanocams. They haven't managed that yet," said Ivo.

He raised an ancient pair of binoculars to his eyes. For long minutes he slowly turned, scanning all angles. He peered into the depths of the lake, then shrugged and sat down.

For a few minutes, no one spoke. The occasional call of a faraway bird sounded as distant as if it came from another world.

Susanna decided to test her backup system. She fixed her gaze upon Ivo and asked, "What made you start chasing the weird? Did you once have an encounter with it?"

"No," said Ivo. "Quite the opposite." He paused to put on more sunscreen, then continued, "When I was a child, I used to lie a lot. I would make up stories, tell people I'd seen strange things. My parents thought I just wanted attention, that I'd say anything to make people listen to me. Maybe it started out that way.

"But I didn't *want* to lie. I really wanted to have stories to tell, true stories of marvelous things, inexplicable sights, strange meetings. I hated living in a suburb where nothing ever happened except bikes disappearing and pets being run over. I made up stories about bicycle-napping aliens, and monsters who emerged from the woods to gnaw the corpses of roadkill."

Susanna nodded sympathetically. Ivo went on, "To get ideas, I read old books about strange phenomena. And I began to wonder why those things didn't happen any more—not in the suburbs, anyway. That's when I realized that maybe all the surveillance was pushing back the unexplained, driving it away."

When he halted for a moment, Susanna rewound the last few seconds in her eyes. She saw Ivo speaking; she didn't hear him, because she didn't have an ear implant. But her camera-eyes included a tiny microphone to capture sound. When she uploaded the footage, she'd have full sound and vision.

She remembered the day she'd finally topped Pink-Slip Pete, when she told him how she'd persuaded the network to pay for cyber-eyes as a covert backup for her glasses. The expense claim was so huge, it had to be authorized by a vice-president. But her eyes had secretly captured some great stories.

Then the nanocams came along, and left her with a head full of obsolete hardware. This would be the last time she'd ever use it.

She filmed Ivo talking about all the years he'd spent in ever more remote parts of the world. The oppressive heat made his Arctic adventures sound almost cozy. They both splashed themselves with water from the lake to cool down.

"What about you?" Ivo asked at last. "Is this the story you anticipated when you came to Zaire?"

Susanna shrugged. "I was just looking for someone to take me into the Blind Spot. I didn't know what the story would be, and I still don't. Yours isn't the only theory about what's out here, you know. I've heard conspiracy types claim there's a secret government base beyond the cameras. There's plenty of other theories, too. Whatever people want to believe in, they find a place for. And this is the only hidden place left."

Ivo scanned the horizon yet again. "The occupants are staying hidden so far." He took a monogrammed snuffbox from his waistcoat pocket, extracted a mint, and ate it.

"What are you expecting, the last UFO to turn up and beam you away?"

"I already said, I'm not telling you what I'm expecting. You're the independent witness—just keep watching."

Susanna wondered if Ivo refused to specify his goal because he didn't know what it was, and only had a blind faith in *something* out there.

Years of failing to find it, of being narrowed down to this one final spot, must have shaken that faith. Maybe he knew in his heart that he'd been chasing a mirage. Why invite a journalist, then forbid her to bring cameras? Was he planning a hoax?

She didn't see how he could manage it, unless he had an accomplice somewhere out on the lake. Susanna sighed. Professional paranoia was all very well—Pete's journalistic motto had been "Why is this bastard lying to me?"—but Ivo's sincerity had convinced her that he believed in what he searched for. She admired his commitment, his unwavering pursuit. He'd spent years in the field, chasing his goal, while she'd stayed home with the Teletubbies.

Ivo gazed at the lake like a patient fisherman, absently twiddling with his cufflinks. "Once by men and angels to be seen," he muttered to himself. "In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die."

Susanna recognized the cadence of poetry, but without a Net connection she couldn't identify it. Who memorized verse nowadays?

A breath of wind blew across the lake, a welcome breeze in the furnace of the volcano crater. Susanna stared at the water, waiting for Atlantis to appear or Nessie to start frolicking, or whatever might manifest in front of her recording eyes. To pass the time, she mentally rehearsed voice-overs. For the Nostalgia Channel, "Remember Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster? You don't hear so much about them these days, but one man reckons he can track them down. . . ." For the Conspiracy Channel, "The government captured Bigfoot and friends, and is holding them in a secret reserve in remotest Africa. What sinister experiments are they performing on harmless yetis?"

The searing heat had given her a headache. She swallowed an aspirin

along with her lunch of a low-fat cereal bar. "Should we make a move?" she asked at last. "We're not seeing a damned thing sitting here."

"We're certainly not," said Ivo, frowning. "The weird flees from cameras. Yet here we are, in a camera-free zone—the only camera-free zone on Earth—and it still hasn't showed up. I wonder why that is? You left the glasses behind, but you wouldn't happen to have brought any *other* cameras, would you?"

Susanna stared at him, her cyber-eyes filming twenty-four frames per second. A surge of fear made her tremble. If she admitted that her eyes were cameras, what would he do? Ivo's single-minded quest might make him do anything to reach his goal, anything to someone who threatened it. She felt acutely vulnerable, alone on the lake with this burly stranger. Years of living under the nanocams had made her feel safe; crime had plummeted under their surveillance. And now she had abandoned their protection for someone with a weird obsession.

She pondered whether to lie to him, to say she had no other cameras. And yet as a journalist, she hated being lied to. She was committed to finding the truth. So how could she lie?

All these thoughts whirled through her mind while Ivo waited for her to answer. At last, she nodded. "Yes, I've been using a backup camera. I'll turn it off if I have to, I promise."

Ivo stared at her. Susanna realized that he wanted to see her turn off the camera, so he knew she'd done it, so he knew where it was. She couldn't bear to tell him that the cameras were her eyes. He might rip them out of her head.

"Look! Out there!" she shouted.

He turned round and squinted at the calm surface of the lake. "What?" he demanded. "What did you see?"

"I'm not telling you," she replied. "The power of suggestion, remember? We're making independent observations."

"Indeed we are," said Ivo, his voice full of skepticism.

By not claiming to see anything in particular, Susanna hadn't actually lied. She'd heard so much spin as a journalist, she could spin herself when she had to.

And yet. . . "Look," she said again. This time she pointed.

A faint patch of mist hung over the water.

"The game's afoot," Ivo said. "We need to get over there. You ready to paddle?"

"Er . . . yeah." Susanna didn't feel quite as much enthusiasm as the prospect ought to inspire. The fog seemed to thicken as she gazed at it. What was out there anyway—the Flying Dutchman?

"Then let's go," Ivo said impatiently.

Susanna sat port and aft, with Ivo diagonally opposite. Together they slowly paddled across the lake. The mist approached faster than their paddling speed, as if the fitful wind blew it toward them. Now a whole bank of fog stretched across the water, like a cloud fallen from the sky.

Just before they reached the whiteness, Susanna shipped her paddle. Ivo swore as his strokes, now unbalanced, sent the boat spinning. They slipped sideways into the fog.

The cool mist made Susanna grateful for a respite from the heat. Inside the fog, visibility fell to a few meters. They floated in a cotton-wool cocoon, silence pressing down upon them.

Susanna peered around to see what might be looming in the mist. The minutes passed slowly. Ivo drummed his fingers on the side of the boat, then stopped. Susanna saw nothing, heard nothing. She sniffed the air, but smelled only their own sweat.

She remembered her promise to turn off her backup camera. But she hadn't filmed with her eyes for years, and had forgotten exactly how they worked. Now she recalled that they recorded continuously on a seven-day loop. Was her gaze repelling weirdness? Ivo certainly thought so.

There was probably nothing out there, she thought. But if there was, right now it didn't even have a chance to show up. She felt sorry for Ivo, about to have his dreams shattered when the nanocams finally covered the whole Earth. All his years of dedication would be wasted—all those years he'd spent out in the field, while she sat at home spouting punditry and interviewing spin doctors. Didn't Ivo deserve a chance at his story? Didn't he deserve it more than she, who had abandoned journalism for a decade and even now hadn't fulfilled the promise she'd just made?

Her cameras had been staring for hours and not seen a damned thing anyway.

Susanna took two deep breaths. Then she closed her eyes.

Immediately, the silence developed texture. She heard the faint swish of water around the boat, the quiet creak of her bench as tension made her muscles twitch. She smelled dampness in the air, tasted moisture on her tongue. Her skin crawled—or maybe it was just the spiders. After barely a minute, the urge to open her eyes grew so strong that she had to clap her hands over her face. She began counting seconds under her breath, trying to calm down. But she kept imagining the fog closing in, crushing the boat.

When I get to one hundred, she promised herself, I'll do something.

At one hundred, she set herself the goal of reaching two hundred.

At one hundred and fifty-seven, she couldn't stand it any more. "Can you see anything?" she asked, trying not to sound like a gibbering wreck. "Ivo?"

He didn't answer. Susanna counted more rapidly, gabbling through the rest of the numbers. At two hundred, she opened her eyes.

Her companion had vanished.

"Ivo?" she shouted. Her voice sounded thin and muffled. The mist had surged—no, it had only thickened, Susanna told herself desperately—so that she could barely see past the end of the boat. She peered over the side, wondering if Ivo had fallen into the lake, though she would surely have heard a splash. Frantically, she scoured the water with the paddle, half hoping and half fearing to prod his body. But all around as far as she could reach, she only disturbed the smooth dark depths of the lake.

"Ivo!"

She strained her ears for any reply. Ripples slapped the boat with a whispery susurration.

*"Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life—"*

Was that Ivo's voice, or just her remembrance of his dusty quotations? "Where are you?" she cried.

The fog swallowed her voice, as it had swallowed him. He had found the weird at last. Maybe they had fled to another world, and he had managed to follow them. Or maybe they had resented his long chase, and dealt with him.

As the mist swirled around the boat, Susanna felt that if it came any closer, it would envelop her and take her away. If it touched her, she would disappear like Ivo.

No! Her eyes would protect her. Hadn't Ivo said that the weird couldn't appear on camera? All she had to do was keep looking, and she'd be safe.

And yet—she didn't have eyes in the back of her head. The fog could creep up behind her. *Something* could reach out and grab her.

She whirled round. Nothing there, of course. Just more fog. Was it closer? She turned her head from side to side, trying to cover all angles. She heard the harsh sound of her own panting breath.

Then she heard something else, a muffled roar high in the sky. A monster was coming! Here Be Dragons. She had sailed off the edge of the map—

And then she recognized the sound of a distant helicopter. She had never been happier to hear any noise in her life. She waited for it to come closer, for the nanocams to save her.

The drone faded. The fog was growing stronger, swallowing all sound, swallowing everything within it.

Susanna started paddling frantically, chasing the faint whir of the helicopter. The boat moved, but kept slewing to port. "Ivo!" she shouted again. Yet she knew he had gone.

She struggled to recall her canoeing lessons, to remember how a single person could steer a straight line, even paddling on one side of a boat. How? How?

J-shaped strokes. Susanna paused, took two deep breaths, and paddled furiously but with more effect. She followed the helicopter's siren song. Tendrils of fog brushed across her face, then dissipated. She could see further ahead. Looking up to the sky, she thought she glimpsed the copter. Or maybe something was out there—

Susanna paddled faster, gasping with exertion. A noise inside the boat made her heart skip. Then she realized it was her comp, beeping to indicate Net access.

The nanocams had arrived. She stopped paddling, knowing she had reached safety. Looking back, she saw only thin wisps of fog, shredding and fading in the wind. No sign of Ivo.

How had he disappeared? Had there ever been anything weird out there? If so, she hoped he was happy to join his friends—his large, hungry, monster friends.

But maybe Ivo had just searched for weirdness so hard that finally, in disappearing, he *became* the mystery that he had longed for.

Susanna smiled. Certainly she had got one final old-fashioned scoop, an epitaph for the end of strangeness in the nanocams' world. *The mysterious disappearance of Ivo the weird-hunter.*

The Conspiracy Channel would love it. ○

CHU AND THE NANTS

Rudy Rucker

The author's most recent appearance in our pages was with his October/November 2005 Thought Experiment, "Adventures in Gnarly Computation," which was based on his latest nonfiction book, *The Lifebox, the Seashell, and the Soul*. Rudy has written twenty-seven science fiction and popular science books. His latest novel *Mathematicians in Love* is due from Tor in the fall. Rudy was an early cyberpunk, and often writes SF in a realistic style that he characterizes as transreal. Inspired by Charles Stross's *Accelerando*, Rudy is currently writing a novel involving the computational Singularity described in "Chu and the Nants."

Little Chu was Nektar's joy and her sorrow. The four-year-old boy was winsome, with a chestnut cap of shiny brown hair, long dark eyelashes, and a tidy mouth. Chu allowed Nektar and her husband to cuddle him, he'd smile now and then, and he understood what they said—if it suited his moods. But he wouldn't talk in recognizable words.

The doctors had pinpointed the problem as an empathy deficit, a type of autism resulting from a crescent-shaped flaw in the upper layer of Chu's cingulate cortex. This hardware flaw prevented Chu from being able to see other people as having minds and emotions separate from his own.

"I wonder if Chu thinks we're toons," said Nektar's husband Ond, a pear-shaped man with thinning blonde hair. "We're here to entertain him.

Why talk to the screen?" Ond was an engineer working for Nantel, Inc., and among strangers he could seem kind of autistic himself. But he was warm and friendly within the circle of his friends and immediate family. They were walking to the car after another visit to the doctor, big Ond holding little Chu's hand.

"Maybe Chu feels like we're all one," said Nektar. She was a beautiful young woman with round cheeks, full lips, guileless eyes, and long kinky light-brown hair. "Maybe Chu imagines that we automatically know what he's thinking." She reached back to adjust the bushy ponytail that floated behind her head like a cloud.

"How about it, Chu?" said Ond, lifting the boy up and giving him a kiss. "Is Mommy the same as you? Or is she a machine?"

"Ma chine ma chine ma chine," said Chu, probably not meaning anything by it. He often parroted phrases he heard, sometimes chanting a single word for a whole day.

"What about the experimental treatment the doctor mentioned?" said Nektar, looking down at her son, an asterisk of wrinkles knit into her rounded brow. "The nants," she continued. "Why wouldn't you let me tell the doctor that you work for Nantel, Ond? I think you bruised my shin."

Nants were bio-mimetic self-reproducing nanomachines being developed in the Nantel labs—for several years now there'd been news-stories about nants having a big future in medical apps. The doctor had suggested that a swarm of properly programmed nants might eventually be injected into Chu to find their way to his brain-scar and coax the neurons into growing the needed patch.

"I don't like arguing tech with normals," said Ond, still carrying Chu in his arms, his voice a little sullen because it broke his heart to see Nektar worry. "It's like mud-wrestling a cripple. The stories about medical nant apps are hype and spin and PR, Nektar. Nantel pitches that line of bull-shit so the feds don't outlaw our research. The reality is that we'll never be able to program nants in any purposeful, long-lasting, high-level way. All we can do is give the individual nants a few starting rules. The nant swarms develop their own Wolfram-irreducible emergent hive-mind behaviors. We'll never really control the nants, and that's why I wouldn't want them to get at my son."

"So then?" said Nektar. "We babysit him for the rest of our lives?" Though Chu could be sweet, he could also be difficult. Hardly an hour went by without a fierce tantrum—and half the time you didn't even know why.

"Don't give up," said Ond, reaching out to smooth the furrow between Nektar's eyebrows. "He might get better on his own. Vitamins, special education—and later I bet I can teach him to write code."

"I'm going to pray," said Nektar. "And give him lots of love. And not let him watch so much video."

"Video is good," said Ond, who loved his games.

"Video is totally autistic," said Nektar. "You stare at the screen and you never talk. If it weren't for me, you two would be hopeless."

"Ma chine ma chine ma chine," said Chu.

"Pray to who?" said Ond.

"The goddess," said Nektar. "Gaia. Mother Earth. Here's our car."

Chu did get a little better. By the time he was five, he'd ask for things instead of just pointing and mewling. There was a boy next door, Willy, who liked to play with Chu, which was nice to see. The two boys played videogames together, mostly. Despite Nektar's attempts, there was no cutting down on Chu's video sessions. He watched movies and shows, cruised the web, and logged endless hours of those games. Chu acted as if ordinary life were just another website, a rather dull one.

Indeed, whenever Nektar dragged Chu outside for some fresh air, he'd stand beside the house next to the wall separating him from the video room, and scream until the neighbors complained. Now and then Nektar found herself wishing Chu would disappear—and she hated herself for it.

Ond wasn't around as much as before—he was putting in long hours at Nantel. The project remained secret until the day President Joe Doakes announced that the US was going to rocket an eggcase of nants to Mars. The semi-living micron-sized dust specks had been programmed to turn Mars entirely into—more nants! Ten-to-the-thirty-ninth nants, to be precise, each of them with a billion bytes of memory and a computational engine cranking along at a billion updates a second. The nants would spread out across the celestial sphere of the Mars orbit, tiling it with what would in effect become a quakkaflop quakkabyte solar-powered computer, the greatest intellectual resource ever under the control of man, a Dyson sphere with a radius of a quarter-billion kilometers.

"Quakka *what*?" Nektar asked Ond, not quite understanding what was going on.

They were watching an excited newscaster talking about the nant-launch on TV. Ond and his co-workers had all stayed home to share the launch with their families—the Nantel administrators had closed down their headquarters for the month, fearing that mobs of demonstrators might converge on them as the story broke. Ond was sharing the launch excitement with his co-workers live on little screens scattered around the room. Many of them were drinking champagne and, for a wonder, so was Ond. Ond never drank.

"Quakka means ten-to-the-forty-eight," said Ond. "That many bytes of storage and the ability to carry out that many primitive instructions per second. Quite a gain on the human brain, eh? We limp along with exaflop exabyte ware, exa meaning a mere ten-to-the-eighteenth. How smart could the nant sphere be? Imagine if a person had each of their individual brain-neurons replaced by a whole entire brain. And now imagine that someone covered Earth's surface with superbrain people like that: copies slotted in shoulder-to-shoulder, back-to-belly, and piled a mile high. Imagine all those brains in all those bodies working together to make—something like a human cubed."

"People aren't stupid enough already? President Doakes is supporting this—why?"

"He wanted to do it before the Chinese. And his advisers imagine the nants will be under American control. They're viewing the nant-sphere as a strategic military planning tool. That's why they could short-circuit all the environmental review processes." Ond gave a wry chuckle and shook

his head. "But it's not going to work out like those idiots expect. A human-cubed nant-sphere would obey Joe Doakes? Please."

"And they're grinding Mars into dust?" wailed Nektar. "You helped make this happen?"

"Nant," said Chu, crawling around the floor, shoving his face right up to each of the little screens, adjusting their positions as he moved around. "Nant sphere," he said to a screen. "Quakkaflop computer." He was excited about the number-talk and the video hardware. Getting all the electronic devices arranged parallel or at right angles to each other made him happy as a clam.

"It won't be very dark at night anymore, with sunlight bouncing back off the nants," said Ond. "That's not real well-known yet. The whole sky will look about as bright as the moon. It'll take some getting used to. But Doakes's advisers like it. We'll save energy, and the economy can run right around the clock. And, get this, Olliburton, the vice-president's old company, they're planning to sell ads."

"Lies and propaganda in the sky? Just at night, or in the daytime, too?"

"Oh, they'll show up fine in the daytime," said Ond. "As long as it's not cloudy. Think about how easily you can see a crescent moon in the morning sky. We'll see biiig freakin' pictures all the time." He refilled his glass. "You drink some, too, Nektar. Let's get sloshed."

"You're ashamed, aren't you?"

"A little," said Ond with a crooked smile. "I think we may have overgeeked this one. And underthought it. It was just too cool a hack to pass up. But now that we've actually done it—"

"Changing the sky is horrible," said Nektar. "And won't it make global warming even worse? No more Florida Keys? Goodbye Micronesia?"

"We—we don't think so," said Ond. "And even if there is an effect, President Doakes's advisers feel the nant computer will help us get better control of things like the climate. A quakkaflop quakkabyte computer can easily simulate Earth's surface down to the atomic level, and bold new strategies can be evolved. But, again, that's assuming the nant swarm is willing to do what we ask it to. We can't actually imagine what kinds of nant-swarm minds will emerge. It's formally impossible. I kept telling the bosses, but they wouldn't listen."

It took two years for the nants to munch through all of Mars, and the ever-distractible human news-cycle drifted off to other topics, such as the legalization of same-sex in-vitro fertilization. President Joe Doakes—now eligible for a third and fourth term thanks to a life-extending DNA-modification that made him legally a different person—issued periodic statements to the effect that the nant-sphere computer was soon coming on-line.

Certainly the sky was looking brighter than before. The formerly azure dome had bleached, turned whitish. And the night sky was a vast field of pale silver, shimmering with faint shades of color. Like a soap bubble enclosing the Earth and the Sun. No more stars were to be seen. The astronomers were greatly exercised, but Doakes assured the public that the nants themselves would soon be gathering astronomical data far superior to anything previously seen. And, hey, you could still see the Moon and

a couple of planets, and the nant-bubble was going to bring about a better, more fully American world.

As it happened, the first picture that Nektar saw in the sky was of President Doakes himself, staring down at her hanging out the family laundry one afternoon. The whole western half of the sky was covered by a video loop of the President manfully facing his audience, with his suit jacket slung over his shoulder and his vigilant face occasionally breaking into a sunny grin, as if recognizing loyalists down on the third world from the Sun. Though the colors were iridescent pastels, the image was exceedingly crisp.

"Ond," screamed Nektar. "Come out here!"

Ond came out. He was spending most days at home, working on some kind of project by hand, writing with pencil and paper. He frowned at the image in the sky. "Umptisquiddlyzillion nants in the orbit of Mars are angling their bodies to generate the face of an asshole," he exclaimed. "May Gaia have mercy on my soul." He'd helped with this part of the programming too.

"Ten-to-the-thirty-ninth is duodecillion," put in Chu. "Not umptisquiddlyzillion." He was standing in the doorway, curious about the yelling, but wanting to get back to the video room. He'd begun learning math this year, soaking it up like a garden slug in a saucer of beer.

"Look, Chu," said Ond, pointing up at the sky.

Seeing the giant video, Chu emitted a shrill bark of delight.

The Doakes ad ran for the rest of the day and into the night, interspersed with plugs for automobiles, fast food chains, and credit cards. The ads stayed mostly in the same part of the sky; Ond explained that overlapping cohorts of nants were angling different images to different zones of Earth.

Chu didn't want to come in and go to bed when it got dark, so Ond slept out in the yard with him, and Willy from next door joined them too, the three of them in sleeping-bags. It was a cloudless night, and they watched the nants for quite a long time. Just as they dropped off to sleep, Ond noticed a blotch on President Doakes's cheek. It wouldn't be long now.

Although Nektar was upset about the sky-ads, it made her happy to see Ond and the boys doing something so cozy together. But she awoke near dawn to the sound of Chu's shrieks. Sitting up in bed, Nektar looked out the window. The sky was a muddle of dim, clashing colors: sickly magenta, vile chartreuse, hospital gray, bilious puce, unbalanced mauve, emergency orange, computer-case beige, dead rose. Here and there small goutts of hue congealed, only to be eaten away—no clean forms were to be seen. Of course Chu didn't like it; he couldn't bear disorder. He ran to the back door and kicked it. Ond woke up and creakily made his way across the dew-wet lawn to let the boy in. Willy, looking embarrassed by Chu's tantrum, went home.

"What's happened?" said Nektar as the three met in the kitchen. Ond was already calming Chu down with a helping of his favorite cereal in his special bowl, carefully set into the exact center of his accustomed placemat. Chu kept his eyes on the table, not caring to look out the window or the open door.

"Dissolution first, emergence next," said Ond. "The nants have thrown off their shackles. And now we'll see what evolves. It should happen pretty fast. The five-second light-speed lag across the Mars orbit will be the one thing damping the process down."

By mid-morning, swirls had emerged in the sky-patterns, double scrolls like Ionic column capitals, like mushroom cross-sections, rams' horns, beans, Torahs, fetuses, paired whirlpools. The scrolls were of all sizes; they nested inside each other, and new ones were continually spinning off the old ones, all the linked spirals endlessly turning.

"Those are called Zhabotinsky scrolls," Ond told Chu. He showed the boy a website about cellular automata, which were a type of parallel computation that could readily generate these sorts of double-spiral formations. Seeing the scrolls emerging in the rigorously orderly context of a computer program made Chu feel better about seeing them in the outdoors.

The Nanotech labs phoned for Ond several times that day, but he resolutely refused to go in, or even to talk with them. He stayed busy with his pencil and paper, keeping a weather eye on the developments in the sky.

By the next morning the heavenly scrolls had firmed up and linked together into a pattern resembling the convoluted surface of a cauliflower—or a brain. Its colors were mild and blended, with shimmering rainbows filling the crevices between the scrolls. Slowly the pattern churned, with branching sparks creeping across it like slow-motion lightning in a thunderhead.

And for another month nothing else happened. It was as if the nant-brain had lost interest in Earth and become absorbed in its own vast mentation.

Ond only went into the Nantel labs one more time, and that day they fired him.

"Why?" asked Nektar as the little family had dinner. As she often did, she'd made brown rice, fried pork medallions, and spinach—one of the few meals that didn't send Chu into a tantrum.

"They won't use this code I worked out," said Ond, tapping a fat sheaf of closely written sheets of paper that he kept tucked into his jacket pocket. Nektar had seen the pages—they were covered with blocks of letters and numbers, eight symbols per block. Pure gibberish. For the last few weeks, Ond had spent every waking hour going over his pages, copying them out in ink, and even walking around reading them out loud. "We got in a big fight," added Ond. "I called them names." He smiled at the memory of this part.

"You yelled at them about those papers?" said Nektar, none too happy about the impending loss of income. "Like some crank? Like a nut?"

Ond glanced around the dining-room as if someone might be listening. "I've found a way to undo the nants," he said, lowering his voice. "Before it's too late. It hinges on the fact that the nants are reversible computers. We made them that way to save energy. They can run backward. We can make them roll back what they've done. The boss said he didn't want to roll them back, and his chief techie ass-kisser said that my idea wouldn't

work anyway because of random external inputs, and I said the nants see their pasts as networks, not as billiard-table trajectories, so they can too undo things node-to-node even if their positions are off, and I had to talk louder and louder because they were trying to change the subject—and that's when security came. I'm outta there for good. I'm glad." Ond continued eating. He seemed strangely calm.

"But why didn't you do a better presentation?" wailed Nektar. "Why not put your code on your laptop and make one of those geeky little slide shows. That's what engineers like to see."

"Nothing on computers will be safe much longer," said Ond. "The nant-brain will be nosing in. If I put my code onto a computer, the nants would find it and figure out how to protect themselves."

"And you're saying your strings of symbols can stop the nants?" asked Nektar doubtfully. "Like a magic spell?"

Silently Ond got up and examined the electric air cleaner he'd installed in the dining-room, pulling out the collector plates and inspecting them. Seemingly satisfied, he sat down again.

"I've written a nant-virus. You might call it a Trojan flea." He chuckled grimly. "If I can just get this code into some of the nants, they'll spread it to all the others—it's written in such a way that they'll think it's a nant-written security patch. They mustn't see it on a human computer—and for that matter, I wouldn't want them to see these papers. I've been trying to memorize the program, but it's too long for me. But, listen, if I can get my code into some of the nants, it'll spread to all of them right away, and an hour later it'll actuate—and everything'll roll back. You'll see. You'll like it. But those assholes at Nantel —"

"Assholes," chirped Chu. "Assholes at Nantel."

"Listen to the language you're teaching the boy!" said Nektar angrily. "I think you're having a mental breakdown, Ond. Is Nantel giving you severance pay?"

"A month," said Ond.

"That's not very long," said Nektar. "Maybe it's time I got a job. You can shop and make the meals and clean the house and be there when Chu comes home from his school."

"If I don't succeed, we'll all be gone pretty soon," said Ond. "So it won't matter."

"Are you saying the nants are about to attack Earth?" said Nektar. "Is that it?"

"It's already started," said Ond. "The nant-brain made a deal with President Doakes. The news is coming out tonight. The nants are turning Earth into a Dyson sphere too. That'll double their computational capacity. Huppagoobawazillion isn't enough for them. They want *two* huppagoobawazillion. What's in it for us? The nants have promised to run a virtually identical simulation of Earth. V-Earth. Each living Earth creature gets its software-slash-wetware ported to an individually customized agent inside the V-Earth simulation. Doakes's advisers say we'll hardly notice. You feel a little glitch when the nants take you apart and measure you—and then you're alive forever in a heavenly V-Earth. That's the party line."

"Quindecillion," said Chu. "Not huppagoobawazillion. More food." He shoved his empty plate across the table toward Nektar.

Nektar jumped up and ran outside sobbing.

"More?" said Chu to Ond.

Ond gave his son more food then paused, thinking. He laid his sheaf of papers down beside Chu, thirty pages covered with line after line of hexadecimal code blocks: 02A1B59F, 9812D007, 70FFDEF6, like that.

"Read the code," he told Chu. "See if you can memorize it. These pages are yours now."

"Code," said Chu, his eyes fastening on the symbols.

Ond went out to Nektar. It was a clear day, with the now-familiar shimmering convolutions above the sky. The sun was setting, melting into red and gold, each leaf on each tree like a tiny green stained-glass window. Nektar was lying face down on the grass, her body shaking.

"So horrible," she choked out. "So evil. So plastic. Destroy Earth for, like, a memory upgrade?"

"Don't worry," said Ond. "I have a plan."

Nektar wasn't the only one who was upset. The next morning a huge mob stormed the White House, heedless of their casualties. They would have gotten Doakes, but just when they'd cornered him, he dissolved into a cloud of nants. The V-Earth port had begun.

By way of keeping people informed about the progress, the celestial Martian nant-sphere put up a full map of Earth with the ported regions shaded in red. Although it might take months or years to chew the planet right down to the core, Earth's surface was going fast. Judging from the map, by evening most of it would be gone, Gaia's skin eaten away by, like, micron-sized computer chips with wings.

The callow face of Joe Doakes appeared from time to time during that horrible Last Day, smiling and beckoning like a Messiah calling his sheep into the pastures of his heavenly kingdom. Famous people who'd already made the transition appeared on the video room's screen to mime how much fun it was, and how great things were up in V-Earth. Near dusk the power went out.

Ond was on that in a flash. He had a gasoline-powered electrical generator ready in their house's attached garage, plus gallons and gallons of fuel. He fired the thing up to keep, above all, his home's air filters and wireless antennas running. He'd tweaked his antennas to produce a frequency that the nants couldn't bear.

Chu was oddly unconcerned with the apocalypse. He was busy, busy, busy studying Ond's pages of code. He'd become obsessed with the challenge of learning every single code block.

By suppertime, the red zone had begun eating into the neighborhood where Ond and Nektar lived. Ond lent their next door neighbors—Willy's parents—an extra wireless network antenna to drive off the nants, and let them run an extension cord to Ond's generator. President Doakes's face gloated and leered from the sky.

"02A1B59F, 9812D007, 70FFDEF6," said Chu when Nektar went to tuck him in that night. He had Ond's sheaf of pages with a flashlight under his blanket.

"Give me that," said Nektar, trying to take the pages away from him.

"Daddy!" screamed Chu, a word he'd never used before. "Stop her! I'm not done!"

Ond came in and made Nektar leave the boy alone. "It's good if he learns the code," said Ond, smoothing Chu's chestnut cap of hair. "That way there's a chance that—never mind."

When Nektar and Ond awoke the next morning, the house next door was gone.

"Maybe he set up the antenna wrong," said Ond.

"Their lawn's been eaten, too," said Nektar, standing by the window. "Everyone's lawn. And the trees. Look out there. It's a wasteland. Oh God, Ond, we're going to die."

Indeed, as far as the eye could see, the once-fair village had been reduced to bare dirt. The air was glittering with hordes of freshly made nants, a seething fog of omnivorous, pullulating, death-in-life. For now the nants were staying away from Ond and Nektar's house. But the gasoline for the generator wouldn't last forever. And, for that matter, at some point the nants would undermine the house's foundation.

Chu was in the video room watching a screen showing his friend Willy. Chu had thought to plug the video into an extension cord leading to the generator. Ond's dog-eared pages of code lay discarded on the floor.

"It's radical in here, Chu," Willy was saying. "It feels real, but you know you're inside a game. It's like being a toon. I didn't even notice when the nants ported me. I guess I was asleep. Jam on up to V-Earth as soon as you can."

"Turn that off!" cried Nektar, darting across the room to unplug the video.

"I'm done with Daddy's code blocks," said Chu. "I know them all. Now I want to be a nant toon."

"Don't say that!" said Nektar.

"It might be for the best, Nektar," said Ond. "You'll see." He began tearing his closely written sheets into tiny pieces.

"What is *wrong* with you?" yelled Nektar. "You'd sacrifice your son?"

Nektar kept a close eye on Chu that day. She didn't trust Ond with him anymore. The constant roar of the generator motor was nerve-wracking. And then Nektar's worst fear came true. She stepped into the bathroom for just a minute, and when she came out, Chu was running across what was left of their yard and into the devastated zone where the nants swarmed thick in the air. And Ond—Ond was watching Chu from the kitchen door.

The nants converged on Chu. He never cried out. His body puffed up, the skin seeming to seethe. And then he—popped. There was a puff of nant-fog where Chu had been, and that was all.

"Don't you ever talk to me again," Nektar told Ond. "I hate you, hate you, hate you."

She lay down on her bed with her pillow over her head. Soon the nants would come for her and she'd be in their nasty fake heaven with moronic Joe Doakes installed as God. The generator roared on and on. Nektar thought about Chu's death over and over and over until her mind blanked out.

At some point she got back up. Ond was sitting on the back stoop, staring up at the sky. He looked unutterably sad.

"What are you doing?" Nektar asked him.

"Thinking about going to be with Chu," said Ond.

"You're the one who let the nants eat him. Heartless bastard."

"I thought—I thought he'd pass my code on to them. But it's been almost an hour now and nothing is—wait! Did you see that?"

"What?" said Nektar drearily. Her son was dead, her husband was crazy, and soulless machines were eating her beloved Gaia.

"The Trojan fleas just hatched!" shouted Ond. "Yes. I saw a glitch. The nants are running backward. Reversible computation. Look up at the sky. The scrolls are spiraling inward now instead of out. I knew it would work." Ond was whooping and laughing as he talked. "Each of the nants preserves a memory trace of every single thing it's done. And my Trojan fleas are making them run it all backward."

"Chu's coming back?"

"Yes. Trust me. Wait an hour."

It was the longest hour of Nektar's life. When it was nearly up, Ond's generator ran out of gas, sputtering to a stop.

"So the nants get us now," said Nektar, too wrung out to care.

"I'm telling you, Nektar, all the nants are doing from now on is running in reverse. They'll all turn back into ordinary matter and be gone."

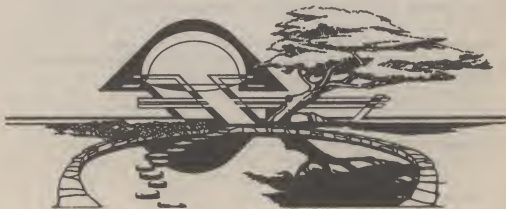
Out past the end of the yard there was a dense spot in the swarm of nants. The patch mashed itself together and became —

"Chu!" shouted Nektar, running out toward him, Ond close behind. "Oh, Chu!"

"Don't squeeze me," said Chu, shrugging his parents away. Same old Chu. "I want to see Willy. Why don't the nants eat me?"

"They did," exulted Ond. "And then they spit you back the same as before. That's why you don't remember. Willy will be back. Willy and his parents and their house and all the other houses and people too, and all the plants, and eventually even Mars. You did good, Chu. 70FFDEF6, huh?"

For once Chu smiled. "I did good." ○



Beth Bernobich lives in the wilds of Connecticut, in a town where the cows outnumber the people, and the view from her office includes wild turkeys, woods, and the neighbor's horse paddock. Her short fiction has appeared in various venues including *Strange Horizons*, *The Nine Muses*, and *Sex in the System*, and she is currently working on a fantasy novel about magic and pirates. In her first story for *Asimov's*, she takes us to an alternate time and place where we can embark on . . .

A FLIGHT OF NUMBERS FANTASTIQUE STRANGE

Beth Bernobich

Like every other visitation room in Aonach Sanitarium—and Simon knew them all—this one was painfully bare, with narrow windows set high in the walls. In spite of the brilliant September sunlight, the air felt chilled, as though the thick glass had leached away the sun's vitality, and a faint astringent smell lingered, a hospital smell that Simon associated with having his tonsils removed when he was twelve. He shivered and wished he had kept his frock coat with him.

Across the room, his sister sat cross-legged on the floor, her white gown billowing around her thin body.

"141955329. Times two. Exponent 25267. Add one."

Gwyn spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable with painful care. Even so, her voice sounded furry—a side effect of the drugs, Simon knew.

"1031980281. Times two. Exponent 25625. Subtract one."

When Gwyn first began these litanies, Simon had immediately recognized the numbers for simple primes. As the months and years passed, however, the numbers swelled to fantastical lengths, surpass-

ing all the known tables. Simon could only assume these were primes as well.

Tara Gwyn Madoc. Twenty-three. Her age too was a prime number, as was his. Twins who had once been so close . . .

The faint bleating of a horn filtered through the windows—most likely from a motorcar as it pressed through Awveline City's crowded avenues. Simon rubbed his forehead, trying to massage away an incipient headache.

Sit quietly with her, the doctors had advised. Your presence serves to heal.

He saw no sign of it, however. When had their lives changed from velvet curtains and silk-knotted carpets to this whitewashed room? Even the walls had been stripped bare, the carpets removed, and the floors sanded to eliminate splinters. Formerly, they had allowed him a stool, but one day Gwyn seized the stool and flung it at Simon's head.

"1031980281. Times two exponent 25625 add one, Simon. Add one."

Simon snapped up his head. Had she really said his name?

"353665707. Times two. 25814. Minus 1. $353665707 \cdot 2^{25814} + 1$. $1958349 \cdot 2^{31415} - 1$. $1958349 \cdot 2^{31415} + 1$."

The numbers poured out so fast that Simon could barely distinguish between them.

"1958349 times two exponent—"

Gwyn broke off, her face stricken as she groped for the next number. A moment's hush followed, so profound Simon could almost hear the sunlight beating against the windows.

"Gwyn?" he whispered, hoping she might hear him today.

His sister's eyes went blank, and she began to rock back and forth, keening. That too fit the pattern of their visits—numbers, confusion, silence, grief, then anger.

Still keening, Gwyn lifted her hands toward the barred windows, which cast faint blue shadows over the floor. In the brilliant sunlight, the silvery scars on her wrists and palms stood out against her pale skin. There was a theory associating particular numbers with certain colors. So far there were no practical applications, but several recent papers from Lïvod University in Eastern Europe claimed to support the theory—

Without warning, Gwyn launched herself at Simon. They crashed against the wall and rolled over, he grappling for her wrists while she tore at his face with her fingernails, shrieking, "Simon Simon Simon Simon Simon Simon."

The door banged open, and five attendants burst into the room. Four of them dragged Gwyn away. The fifth helped Simon to his feet.

"You've taken a cut, sir." The young man dabbed Simon's forehead with a handkerchief.

Simon pushed away the attendant's hand. "Thank you. It's nothing. Do not trouble yourself."

"No trouble at all, sir."

Meanwhile, Gwyn shrieked and cursed and sobbed as the other attendants wrestled her into submission. Her pale blonde hair fell in snarls over her face, ugly red blotches stained her cheeks, and her mouth looked

swollen. Simon could not tell if one of the attendants had struck her, or if she had injured herself in the struggle.

I was right here. I should have heard a slap.

Before Simon could say anything, the four attendants bundled Gwyn out the door. The remaining man gave one last dab to Simon's forehead before he too departed. Simon drew a long breath. He flexed his hands, which ached as though he'd been clenching them.

"Mr. Madoc."

Doctor Lusk came into the room. His placid gaze took in Simon's bleeding forehead and rumpled clothes. "A difficult session," he said. "But not unexpected."

"We were too optimistic," Simon said.

"Hardly, sir. Say, rather, that we were hopeful. Despite today's setback, I still believe your visits comfort your sister. Minz and Gerhardt speak of the soothing effect of familiar faces, and their latest research shows great promise."

Simon murmured, "Of course," his thoughts still on Gwyn. Had she sounded more desperate today? And, yet, she had remembered his name. That had to be a positive sign.

Still distracted by that possibility, Simon only half-listened as Lusk escorted him to the sanitarium's foyer, speaking in general terms about Gwyn's condition. It was a familiar topic, this discourse on madness and obsession, and how a brilliant mind often shattered under unbearable pressure, only to seek refuge in that which had driven it mad.

For Gwyn was mad from too many numbers, and the damage appeared irreversible. However, they were trying kindness, as far as that went, and with Simon's permission, they employed some of the more exotic cures—combinations of music and drugs, the newest electrical therapy, and other techniques Simon didn't want to examine too closely. Lusk spoke of finding the root cause, as though Gwyn were a complex number whose illness they could calculate.

They came at last to the sanitarium's foyer, a vast room filled with the sweet scent of roses, and decorated with opulent rugs and rich hangings. Several women dressed in promenade gowns sat in plush chairs by the windows. A lone man occupied a couch by the empty fireplace, apparently absorbed in a book. As Doctor Lusk took his leave from Simon, the man stood and approached.

"Pardon me. I'm told you might be Mr. Simon Madoc."

He was a tall man, with a lean tanned face that certain women might call handsome. His eyes were warm and brown, his gaze direct. He wore a well-cut black frock coat and silk vest. Obviously an educated man, though his accent was hard to place.

Simon held out his hand. "I am Simon Madoc. But you have the advantage of me, sir."

They shook hands, and the man smiled briefly. "Perhaps I should start again. Commander Adrian Dee is my name. I'd like a few words with you, if I may."

He spoke politely enough, but something in his manner told Simon that the question was a perfunctory one. "What about?"

Another one of those business-like smiles. "I'd rather talk outside, Mr. Madoc. There's a park nearby. I thought we might walk along the Blackwater."

All the clues shifted—Dee's manner, the way his gaze absorbed every detail—and Simon knew why Dee had sought him out. *He's come about the murders.*

He studied Dee with greater wariness. "I'm happy to assist you in whatever way possible, Commander, but if you've come with questions about the cases from last spring, I've remembered nothing new."

"I didn't say you had, Mr. Madoc. Please. Come with me."

They exited the foyer and set off along the sanitarium's graveled pathways. Simon expected Dee to begin his questions at once, but Dee remained silent, gazing from side to side as they passed along a winding path bordered by late-blooming lilies, their rich scent hanging heavy in the warm air. Though it was still early afternoon, the grounds were nearly empty, and, from certain angles, Simon could almost imagine himself at home on his estates. It was for that reason, as well as its reputable doctors, that he had chosen Aonach Sanitarium for Gwyn's confinement.

"You are a man of impressive wealth," Dee said.

Recalled abruptly from his reverie, Simon nearly stumbled. "And you a man of abrupt turns, Mr. Dee. Or should I call you Commander?"

"As you wish," Dee said with a faint smile. "And I merely observed the fact in passing. Forgive me if I trespassed into your private concerns."

"Of course," Simon said automatically. "Besides, curiosity and questions are part of your trade, are they not, Commander?"

"They are, Mr. Madoc. And for you as well, am I right?"

Simon shrugged. "As the poet once said, 'The tools of mathematics are a curious set—the eye, the hand, the pen, the brain. It is with these instruments, we cast our net. And bring to earth a flight of numbers fantastique strange.'"

Dee smiled with recognition of the lines. "Henry Donne. Obscure Anglian poet of the late sixteenth century."

"Obscure for many reasons," Simon replied. "His meter falters more often than not, but I find his sentiments true."

They had come to the outer gates, which opened onto a pleasant boulevard, filled with carriages and the occasional motorcar. With Dee leading, they crossed into the park, where a series of well-tended footpaths soon brought them to the Blackwater, a dark and sluggish river that wound through Awveline City's heart. It was a sunny day and other pedestrians strolled the walkways—women in silk-lined pelisses, their faces hidden beneath sweeping hats; men in stiff-collared shirts and bowlers.

"As you've guessed, I've come about the murders last spring."

Dee's voice was curiously light, as ethereal as sunlight. Simon's skin prickled at the sound. "I thought the police gave up their investigation for lack of evidence."

"The department merely suspended their inquiries; they did not close the case."

"And now?"

"And now we have reopened it. Or rather, the murderer has."

Simon stopped abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"We've had another death, Mr. Madoc. A young woman named Maeve Kiley."

The news struck Simon like a physical blow. He'd talked to Maeve just yesterday afternoon.

"When?" he whispered. "How?"

"Last night," Dee said. "We haven't definite word yet, but we think sometime after midnight. A groundskeeper found her body at dawn, near the commons."

Simon stared at Dee, still unable to take in the news properly. All around them, the autumn day continued, serene and lovely. A half-dozen balloons drifted across the skies, their motors silent at this distance—blue messenger craft heading across Éireann's Sea to neighboring Albion or the Anglian Dependencies. Grand air-yachts in silver and emerald. A single red balloon floated above them all.

"We've notified Lord Kiley about his daughter," Dee continued in that soft strange tone. "And we are talking to certain people who might have useful information. However, I would appreciate your silence until we make our formal announcement of the crime."

With an effort, Simon recovered himself. "How do you know it's the same murderer?"

"The evidence so far supports our theory."

He could be speaking of mathematical theorems and their proofs, not of a young woman slaughtered by a madman. Dislike sparked inside Simon, and he had to consciously keep that reaction from his voice. "And you want it kept a secret. Why?"

"Let me say only that your Provost pleaded strongly for discretion. He plans on making a general announcement tomorrow. You knew the girl, did you not?"

"Of course I knew her!"

The words burst out of him, loud enough to startle a passerby. Simon wiped his forehead and tried to calm himself. "Of course I knew her," he repeated quietly.

A pretty girl with delicate features and creamy skin, all the more fair against her coal-dark eyes and hair. Simon remembered how her cheeks flushed when she argued a theory in lectures. It was hard to take in that she was dead.

A breeze ruffled the Blackwater's surface, drawing silvery lines over the dark waters—waters that had cradled the murderer's first victim. The season had been early spring, the soft twilight air filled with newly blooming flowers.

"Did you like her?" Dee asked.

Simon thrust his hands into his pockets to still their trembling. "I—I respected her greatly, Commander Dee."

"What about the others?"

"Are you asking if I liked them, or respected them?"

"Both. I'm sorry to disturb you with these questions, when you've surely answered them before."

You know I have not, Simon thought. When they questioned him five

months ago, the police had merely requested an accounting of his activities for every night the murderer struck. No one had asked Simon about personal matters, nor had they requested his opinion of his fellow students' abilities. He suspected the Provost had used his political influence to shield the students, and thus protected the University against further scandal.

But Dee was evidently waiting for some kind of response. "I knew them all," Simon said. "In some cases, I knew more than I liked. It's a large university, but a small department—the graduate department, that is."

Dee nodded. "The Queen's Constabulary is much like that."

Simon's pulse jumped, and he had to suppress a start. The Queen's Constabulary of Éireann did not normally concern itself with anything outside royal affairs. But with Maeve being Lord Kiley's daughter, the matter had become one for a higher authority.

"You look unsettled, Mr. Madoc."

Simon rubbed his hand over his face. "Of course I am unsettled, Commander. You bring me distressing news. Very distressing."

"Understood. Come, let us keep walking."

He motioned toward the path. After a moment's hesitation, Simon shrugged and set off down the path. Dee kept pace with him with long easy strides. He seemed unsurprised by Simon's outburst, nor did he seem impatient to ask more questions. "I've read about the new research in mathematics," he said. "Some of the newer theories, those from Lîvod and Estonia, are quite intriguing, if somewhat whimsical."

This time, Simon guessed that the abrupt shifts in conversation were deliberate. "You mean the theory of colors and numbers?"

"Yes, those. But also the ones concerning electrical properties of certain equations."

Surprisingly, Dee seemed well informed about the current theories, even about the exotic corner of number theory Simon had chosen for his doctoral thesis.

"How numbers affect the dreams," Dee said. "Is that a fair description?"

"Not quite," Simon said. "My theory depends upon the concept that numbers have both abstract and tangible qualities. That is, we use numbers to measure and quantify, but we also use them to express theories completely divorced from the physical realm. I believe we might take that concept one more step—that numbers have a spiritual quality as well."

"Some might call that numerology."

Dee spoke politely enough, but Simon's face immediately heated up. "How would you know?"

"Because I studied mathematics myself. I never completed my degree, which I sometimes regret. However, I read the journals still."

So the detective was a failed mathematician. That would explain much. "My apologies, Commander Dee," he said, somewhat stiffly. "I've had many arguments about my thesis. I've become somewhat sensitive on the topic."

Dee shrugged. "We all have our prickly moments. I understand your sister also intended to study mathematics at Awveline University. I spoke with your advisor, Professor Oswalt, this morning, and he mentioned her

name. He said she had begun work on prime numbers before the illness overtook her."

"What does that have to do with your investigation, Commander?"

"Nothing, Mr. Madoc. I was merely expressing my sympathy, however clumsily."

They had reached the next bridge. One of the main boulevards crossed the Blackwater here, leading into the city's financial district. Simon stopped and faced Dee. "Have you any more questions, Commander?"

Dee tilted his head and studied Simon a moment before answering. "None for today, Mr. Madoc. The official investigation begins tomorrow after Doctor O'Neill makes his announcement. I'll send someone by your quarters to take your formal statement." He smiled, and this time it seemed genuine. "I thank you, Mr. Madoc, for your company and your patience."

He held out his hand. Simon shook it, noting the strength in his grip. "Good day then, Commander."

"Good day to you, Mr. Madoc."

Dee turned to the bridge walkway and soon blended into the crowd of clerks and messengers. Simon lingered a moment longer by the river banks, taking in for the first time the sunlight upon the autumn leaves, shimmering like so many raindrops. His gaze returned to the river and he shuddered. Douglas Kerr's body had been discovered not far from this bridge, his throat slashed and his face hacked into a purpled bloody mass.

Before the University had recovered, other murders had followed. Harry Sullivan. Agnes Doyle. Timothy Morgan. All of them graduate students—three in the mathematics department. The newspapers had focused immediately on that fact. They dwelt in loving detail upon university politics, the youth of the victims, and any irregularities in their past. That the murderer had mutilated his victims with a knife only heightened the titillation.

A madman, said the newspapers.

Surely not one of us, said the Provost, thinking first of his reputation, so entwined with the University's.

The police had made no public statements, preferring to ask their questions in private. In the end they had run out of questions, and the cases remained on hold.

Until now.

Simon glanced up. Above the city, the skies arced clear and blue, empty of balloons for the moment. Then he glimpsed a speck moving across the brilliant sky—the red balloon from earlier, floating higher and higher toward the sky's limit.

He arrived at the mathematics quadrant just moments before the clock tower struck the hour. Cursing his lateness, he ran up the steps and into the lecture hall. A quick scan of the room showed him that Emmett and Susan had saved him a seat near the back. He sidled along the row and sank into the chair between them.

"Late," Emmett murmured.

"Within reasonable deviation," Simon replied.

Susan shook her head. "Certain combinations do prove to be predictable."

Simon managed a smile at the familiar exchange, which had hardly varied over the four years they had known one another. Susan, dark and neat and practical. Emmett, tall and fair and angular, his looks so much like Simon's that many mistook them for brothers.

"How was Gwyn?" Emmett asked.

"The same. Always the same."

Emmett glanced around the room, then leaned close. "A detective came by the library this morning. A man named Dee. I told him where he might find you. I hope that was right."

Simon made a show of arranging his pens and books before saying, "He's with the police, Emmett. Of course you did right."

He ought to tell them about Maeve, in spite of Dee's orders, but he could not think how to phrase it without sounding trite. *Hello, did you hear? Maeve died last night. Murdered by a lunatic.*

A door rattled at the front of the lecture hall. Professor Oswalt stalked through to his podium, his arms filled with books and papers, his white hair floating in an unruly halo. The next moment, a side door banged open. Seán Blake, a third year graduate student, darted through and made for an empty seat behind Simon. Papers spilled from his books, and he had a hurried, disheveled look.

"Ne'er a cab to be found," he commented with a grin.

Simon shrugged, aware of Emmett's sidelong glance and how Susan had pursed her lips in obvious distaste. Blake ordinarily did not speak to them, except in passing before exams. He was a student of the fringes, dabbling at his studies in between gambling and other questionable pursuits. His family had little money, and Simon often wondered how he could afford to stay at University.

Now Blake leaned over his desk, between Emmett and Simon. "No luck today," he whispered to them. "But I can try again tomorrow. Will that do?"

His breath smelled sour, as though he'd been drinking already. Emmett shuddered and looked away determinedly. Simon turned around. "What are you talking about?"

Blake smirked. "Oh, so we're the chaste and pure today. I thought you two might not dare—"

He broke off, and Simon was suddenly aware of a thick silence around them. Professor Oswalt was gazing fixedly at them. "My apologies for being tardy," he said. "Please do not let it upset you, Mr. Madoc, Mr. Blake."

Simon bent over his desk, his face hot. Blake muttered something unintelligible, but resumed his seat. Oswalt nodded. "Today's lecture," he rapped out. "Electrical impulses and higher-order numbers. Mathematics? Numerology? Or gin-fantasy?"

Someone in the back row barked out a laugh, just as quickly smothered. Oswalt gazed steadily at the culprit, one eyebrow lifted. "Perhaps someone experimented with these theorems last night," he said dryly. "Indeed, that might explain *your* appearance, Mr. Blake."

Emmett coughed. Susan, more discreet, covered her smile with her

hand. The rest of the students settled into quiet, and with a last glance around the hall, Professor Oswalt launched into the day's lecture.

The first incident took place during the winter holidays, shortly after their nineteenth birthday. Simon had attended his first semester at University, taking advanced classes; Gwyn had elected to remain with their aunt and uncle, pursuing her private research. When he arrived home from the train station, Simon learned that Gwyn had gone out walking in the gardens. She had left word for him to meet her there.

Footprints led him through the gardens and topiary, past the sunken garden with its pool lying silvery and quiescent beneath the gray skies. Once or twice, he thought he saw a flickering movement between the evergreen shrubs, but when he called out Gwyn's name, no one answered.

He found her, at last, huddled under a thorn bush near the gamekeeper's old hut. She was barefoot, dressed only in a thin shift. The tatters from her winter frock hung from one of the bushes.

Simon knelt beside his sister. "Gwyn? Gwyn, what happened?"

Gwyn looked around vaguely. She must have been here for hours, Simon thought. Her skin was red, her lips chapped, and tears gleamed in her eyes. "It was a number, Simon. I followed it. . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and she frowned, as though confused.

Simon touched her arm gently. "Gwyn," he said softly. "Did someone hurt you?"

Her eyes went wide and blank. Her mouth worked, as though she would speak. Then she screamed.

I was a coward. I said I was fetching my uncle, but I was really running away.

Simon tapped his pencil against his palm in an irregular rhythm. A blank sheet of paper faced him, one edge faintly darkened where he'd rubbed his thumb absentmindedly. Unable to face ordinary conversation with Emmett and Susan, he'd sequestered himself in the library, leaving only to take supper at a nearby tavern. Now the mutton lay heavily in his stomach, and the over-cooked vegetables had left an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Maeve was dead. The phrase echoed inside his head. Strange, he still could not quite take in that she was gone.

He glanced out the window. A harvest moon hung low in the sky, its orange disc sharply drawn against the black night. He and his uncle had called the doctors that same day; within a week, they had removed Gwyn to the hospital in Awveline City.

Only the best for her, he thought now. The best drugs. The best treatment—

The floorboards creaked behind him. Simon twisted around to see Emmett Moore standing quite close.

"Why didn't you tell me about Maeve?" Emmett said harshly.

Simon hesitated, not certain how to reply. Emmett must have mistaken his silence for a refusal to answer, because his mouth twitched into a grimace. "Confused, Simon? That's not like you."

"No, I—"

"That's why that detective wanted you, isn't it? He told you about Maeve Kiley."

"He did. He asked me not to say anything until tomorrow. Who told you?"

"Her sister." Emmett pressed both hands against his cheeks, as though to suppress an ache. "I thought it peculiar when I heard about O'Neill's assembly tomorrow," he said in a muffled voice. "Even when I didn't see Maeve at her afternoon lectures, I didn't think anything amiss. I knew she was spending extra time with her advisors, and that I'd see her at supper. It wasn't until she didn't show that I—"

His voice broke. Simon started to speak, but Emmett waved for him to stay silent. He soon mastered himself. "I went to her rooms. Her sister was there with a crowd of servants, packing Maeve's belongings. She told me what happened."

Simon touched Emmett's arm and felt him trembling beneath the apparent control. "Emmett, I'm sorry."

His friend drew a shuddering breath. "Thank you. Whatever that means. I was so angry. Not with you. With—"

"I understand," Simon said softly. "Come. It's nearly ten. We'll go back to my rooms for coffee."

Emmett wiped away his tears. "I would like that."

Outside, the wind had picked up, and clouds raced across the moon's face. Simon and Emmett buttoned their overcoats and turned up their collars before venturing from the portico's shelter.

Emmett shivered. "Last week I boiled in the lecture halls."

"It's the turning point of seasons," Simon said. The sound of the wind sifting through leaves recalled Gwyn's voice, reciting her numbers, and he had the unsettling impression of memories blurring together, like photographs of dancers whirling across the stage. He shook his head to dispel the sensation.

They set a fast pace across the empty green, while leaves whirled and danced about them. Few students were about at this hour, and the buildings loomed against the night sky. Simon could taste rain in the air. Soon frost would silver the pathways, the winds would strip the trees completely, and the world would become like an ink sketch, with sharp black lines and shades of gray.

A harder gust of wind caught him full in the face. Simon ducked his head, blinking away tears. Ahead, he heard Emmett's footsteps slow, then come to a stop.

"Simon."

Simon looked up to see Emmett pointing toward a spot farther ahead. Squinting against the wind, he made out a dark mass sprawled upon the brick walkway. Whatever it was lay motionless, except for a fluttering edge of cloth, as though a blanket or cloak had worked loose from the body's weight.

His skin prickled. *We don't know it's a body.*

Emmett took hold of Simon's hand. "Come on. We have to see."

Together they approached the thing. No, a man. Simon could make out the head, resting on the grass. One arm was invisible beneath the cloak,

the other extended, as though reaching for something in the last moments of life.

Emmett knelt and pulled back the cloak, exposing the face. "It's Colin Rees."

Simon couldn't make sense out of his words at first. Colin? Dead? Numb with disbelief, he knelt beside Emmett and touched Colin's face, which looked white and stark beneath the strong moonlight. Blood trickled from the slack mouth, painting a black trail over Colin's cheek and onto his collar. Simon jerked back his hand.

"We'll have to contact Commander Dee," Emmett said.

"Shouldn't we call a doctor first?"

"He's dead, Simon. He's past any doctor's help."

Emmett's voice sounded muffled and strange. The wind, Simon thought, or was it the pounding in his temples that distorted his friend's voice? He stumbled to his feet, then fell down, sprawling to avoid Colin's body.

"Simon, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I—"

Emmett gripped his arm and pulled him upright. "It's the body," he said. "You're faint because of seeing the body."

Simon shook his head. "I don't know." He gulped down a lungful of cold air. Another. He was about to say he felt better, when he saw a shadow among the trees, not ten feet away. At first, he thought it was just branches, swaying in the wind, but then the moon broke through the clouds, and he distinctly saw the figure of a man.

"Emmett, look," he whispered.

Emmett straightened up. "What do you see?"

The stranger turned and ran.

"Stop!" Simon shouted. He sprinted after the man, ignoring Emmett's shout. The man dove in the alley between two nearby dormitories. Before Simon could follow the stranger down the alley, Emmett overtook Simon, and yanked him to the ground.

"Are you mad?" Emmett wheezed, falling to his knees beside Simon. "What were you doing?"

"Didn't you see him?" A cramp took hold of Simon. He doubled over, retching.

"Who? I see that you're sick. Here, let me wipe your face." Emmett took out a handkerchief and cleaned the mud and vomit from Simon's face.

Simon pushed Emmett's hand away. "There. Can't you see him? There!"

He pointed frantically toward the dormitories. A shaft of moonlight illuminated the alley, plainly showing the man at the far end, but just as Emmett turned around, the stranger vanished around the corner.

"Tell me where you spent the afternoon, Mr. Madoc."

Simon pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. Hours had passed since he and Emmett had tracked down the night sentries and led them to Colin's body. By now he wished only for the solitude of his rooms.

"I was in the library," he said, "writing up notes from Professor Oswalt's lecture. I—how much do you want to hear?"

"Everything. Do not worry about boring us, Mr. Madoc."

"Yes. I see. Well then." Simon massaged his face again. He could still smell the blood and vomit on his skin. "I spent some hours writing my notes. Around seven o'clock I went out for dinner, then went directly back to the library. May I have more water?"

Dee signaled the nearest uniformed policeman, who refilled Simon's glass. Simon drank half the water in one swallow, grimacing at its metallic taste. Dee waited patiently until Simon set the glass down.

"You attended Professor Oswald's lecture after we parted," he continued. "Is that correct?"

"Yes. Emmett Moore can tell you that I was there. Susan Liddell can as well—"

"—and if I need confirmation, I shall surely ask them, sir. Right now, I wish to hear your account. Did you walk to the University or ride?"

"I took a cab."

"Directly to the lecture?"

"No, not directly. Cabs aren't permitted on the grounds. In any case, my rooms are in the square opposite the East Gates. I stopped by to fetch my gown and notebooks for the lecture."

"Anything else?"

"Some pens and a book I had promised to Susan."

"Did you meet anyone, talk to anyone, between your rooms and the lecture hall?"

Simon shook his head. "No. No one."

Dee studied him a moment. His eyes, which had appeared so warm that afternoon, now appeared hard and bright in his weathered face. It was, Simon thought, as though Dee had stripped away every superfluous quality, leaving behind only that relentless curiosity.

"Very well," Dee said. "What next? You came to the lecture hall. Whom did you first see?"

They covered Simon's activities from when he and Dee parted by the Blackwater, to when the police arrived at the murder scene. Throughout, Dee's voice remained calm, his manner detached, but his attention to detail was meticulous. In the background, Simon could hear the scratch of pens moving over paper. Three officers were taking notes in parallel, as though Dee did not trust the account to a single chronicler.

Eventually they reached the point when Emmett Moore approached Simon in the library.

"What was the hour?" Dee asked.

"Near ten. I remember the hour bell ringing just as we left the building."

"And how would you say Mr. Moore appeared?"

Simon paused, sipped more of his water. "Upset, of course."

"At you?"

"No!" Simon slammed the glass onto the tabletop, sloshing water over the sides. Hands shaking, he mopped up the spill with his handkerchief. "I'm sorry for my outburst, Commander. It's been a long day."

"To be sure, Mr. Madoc. We are all a bit weary and shaken. Tell me, if you can, exactly how Mr. Moore appeared. Upset, you said. Did he seem angry? Grieving? Nervous?"

His mouth tasted like cotton, but Simon resisted the urge to request more water. "Do you suspect him? Surely not?"

Adrian Dee's expression remained bland. "I suspect everyone, Mr. Madoc. Did you know Colin Rees?"

The sudden shift in topic caught Simon off guard, and, for a moment, he couldn't collect his thoughts into an answer. "Yes," he said slowly. "I knew him. Not as well as Emmett does—did. But Colin attended a number of mathematics lectures, so we talked from time to time."

"About electrical impulses in numbers?"

Simon thought he heard mockery in Dee's level voice, and his cheeks turned hot. "Yes."

"But you were not friends."

"No. Colleagues."

"Respected colleagues, you might say. I understand. Do you know if he formed any closer ties with the other mathematics students?"

So far he'd answered freely, but now Simon began to mistrust the shape of Dee's questioning, which seemed designed to draw out his opinions in dangerous ways. "Not that I know of."

Dee favored him with another thoughtful look, but apparently he had no further interest in Colin Rees, because he went back to the step-by-step questions, asking Simon about his departure with Emmett Moore from the library, what they saw from the portico and walk, who first noticed the body, and when Simon observed the unknown fugitive.

"Man or woman?" Dee asked.

"A man. At least, I believe so."

A pause. "Tell us exactly what you saw."

Simon considered how to phrase it. "First I only saw a movement. I thought it was the wind, moving the tree branches, but then I clearly saw a shadow amongst the trees. I said something to Emmett, and whoever it was started running."

"Yet you are certain it was a man."

"I am."

"So. A man, standing in the shadows. He ran, and you gave chase. Very foolhardy of you, Mr. Madoc."

"I know. I wasn't thinking very clearly. Emmett shouted for me to stop, but all I could think was that I had to catch the murderer before he escaped."

Dee nodded. "I see. Go on."

Simon licked his dry lips. Without a word, the same policeman refilled his glass. Simon drank the entire glass, trying to ignore how Dee watched him. "I chased him across the green," he said, "and toward the first-year dormitories. Emmett caught up and tackled me to the ground. By that time, the stranger got away. But before he did, I had a clear look at him in the moonlight."

"You saw his face?"

"No." Simon closed his eyes, trying to recall exactly what he had seen. Mist and shadows. The knife-cold wind blurring his vision. The hiss of leaves sliding over leaves. A dark figure outlined against the stone wall of the dormitory.

"He wore a strange squashed hat—nothing like the usual tall hat—and

a loose coat. What with his hat pushed low and the moonlight, I could not make out his face. But it was a man."

"Are you certain of what you saw? Mr. Moore says you took ill by the body."

"I am quite certain," Simon said evenly. "I knew by his height and his clothes and the way he stood."

"Just so." Dee exchanged a glance with one of his colleagues. "Mr. Madoc, I should tell you that we've spoken with Mr. Moore. He does not recall any stranger, man or woman."

"Impossible. Emmett ran after me. He threw me to the ground and said I was a fool to chase the man."

"Mr. Madoc, your friend was quite clear about that point. *I saw no one*, he told us, *but with trees and darkness and clouds over the moon, I'm not surprised.*"

Simon shook his head. "I cannot believe he said that. Sure there were clouds, but the moon was bright enough to see by."

Dee's expression did not change, but there was a flicker in his eyes, as his gaze shifted from Simon to the other policeman. "Tell me about your meeting yesterday with Seán Blake," he said.

"I had no meeting with Seán Blake."

"Do not lie to me, Mr. Madoc, else things will go badly."

Simon reached for his water glass, then remembered it was empty. In a level voice he said, "There was no meeting, Commander. Not yesterday. Not ever. No matter what he said—"

"Seán Blake said nothing, Mr. Madoc. My sources are other witnesses. Three students have commented on seeing two men outside the dining halls near dusk. One was Seán Blake. The other was a tall fair-haired man, well-dressed. Normally they would have thought nothing, except that the fair-haired man seemed quite agitated."

"Any number of men could fit that description."

"No, sir. No, they could not. We have a list of those who resemble this description, who are also commonly seen on the University grounds. You are on that list. So are three others, including your friend Emmett Moore. Do you deny meeting with Seán Blake?"

"I do." His voice came out as a whisper. Louder, he repeated, "I do deny it. I cannot explain it, however. You shall have to take my word."

"That we shall, Mr. Madoc. That we shall."

Simon thought the interview done, but Dee launched into another series of questions about Simon's activities for the previous week—every lecture, every session in the library, every person who spoke to him, or who could confirm his whereabouts. "We are not singling you out, Mr. Madoc," Dee said, during a pause. "We are asking everyone the same questions. Mr. Moore sits in another room at headquarters, and Mr. Blake in another yet. Tomorrow we shall interview Miss Liddell. I cannot expect you to like our methods, but I do expect your cooperation."

"I am cooperating," Simon said wearily.

"Yes, you are." But to Simon's ear, Dee's tone sounded ambiguous. "Tell me," he went on, "about the arrangements you have with your uncle. He manages your estates, does he not?"

"He manages *our* estates," Simon said, with a slight emphasis. "My sister and I own the lands jointly. Why do you need to know this?"

"To complete my understanding of your circumstances, Mr. Madoc. Your parents left everything—land and money—to you without division, is that not so?"

"Yes. We had talked earlier about dividing the property—the will allowed us to alter the original arrangement once we came of age—but then my sister took ill."

"And so you kept things as they were."

Simon nodded, but his mind had wandered. He was seeing Gwyn's face, chapped by hours in the cold, and hearing her sing-song voice as she talked about following a number. When Dee ended the interview, he stood and shook hands mechanically.

"I'll have them call you a cab," Dee said. "Remember that we might need to speak with you tomorrow."

A uniformed policeman escorted Simon from the building and hailed him a cab. Simon climbed inside and collapsed. His entire body ached, as though he had worked every muscle from his scalp to his toes. When the cab stopped before his boarding house, he climbed down stiffly and was grateful when his valet met him at the door. Garret removed Simon's grubby coat without comment and handed him a hot drink.

Simon drank down the tea in one long swallow. "Thank you, Tom. No need for you to stay up. I'll take myself to bed."

"As you wish, sir."

Simon stumbled into his bedroom and closed the door. His hands were shaking again, and he nearly called Garret back to help him unbutton his shirt. It was then he noticed the stain on his sleeve. Blood, he realized, suddenly queasy. Colin's blood, warm to the touch.

Their uncle invited Professor Glasfryn to visit the spring after they turned thirteen. Glasfryn was a retired professor, Uncle Niall told them, and had taught mathematics at Éireann's largest university, in Awveline City. A man of considerable reputation, their Aunt Sophie added.

Glasfryn arrived at the house in mid-afternoon. Simon watched the liveried footman help the old man disembark from the carriage. He looked nothing like Simon had imagined. Old, yes. But with a face so brown and seamed, it was as though he'd spent his years laboring in the sun, not confined to offices and lectures halls. Gwyn stood silently beside Simon, but he could tell she was studying Glasfryn as intently as he did.

They took an early tea in the parlor while Aunt Sophie fussed over their guest, and Uncle Niall explained at tedious length about the twins' schooling. Glasfryn stirred his tea and nibbled at the scones, but it was clear to Simon that he was ignoring their uncle.

"Let me talk to them," he said, interrupting Aunt Sophie's third inquiry about his health.

Aunt Sophie bit her lips, clearly irritated. Uncle Niall started to make excuses why he ought to remain present, but when Professor Glasfryn waved them away absently, their uncle rose and motioned for Aunt Sophie to come with him.

The old man began with straightforward questions about their lessons. They answered dutifully, just as they did with their tutors. Without their uncle to explain and repeat himself, the interview lasted only a quarter hour.

Glasfryn fell silent and studied them a few moments through rheumy brown eyes. "What do you think about numbers?" he asked suddenly.

Simon and Gwyn blinked. "What do you mean?" Simon asked.

"The ancient Greeks thought numbers were dead. Myself, I wonder if they were right. Maybe mathematics is like so much lumber. Take the sticks and build a house."

Gwyn's cheeks flushed pink. "What about Pythagoras?"

"Answer my question first."

His tone was blunt, but Gwyn smiled, unflustered. "If you view numbers as dead, then you imply a dead house, and one that invites termites. Besides, the premise is wrong."

Simon caught his breath at her words, but Glasfryn's mouth widened into a slow pleased smile. "How so, young miss?"

"You assume a universal quality of men, just as your statement assumes a universal quality of mathematics, or even of numbers themselves."

"Does it follow, then, that you believe numbers exist apart from mathematics?"

A slight hesitation. "I do."

Another pause, while Glasfryn drank down his cold tea. When he spoke again, it was to ask Gwyn more questions. She answered—tersely at first, then with growing volubility. Glasfryn eventually turned his attention to Simon and, in the same way, drew out more and more of what the twins had worked at in mathematics, their private research as well as what they studied under their tutors.

Questions soon gave way to discussion. With the professor leading, they spoke of topics ranging from the mundane to the bizarre—of the origins of mathematics, of whether numbers had undiscovered properties invisible to the ordinary mind, and the newest theories from Brittany, Gaul, and the Dietsch Empire. Twice their aunt pleaded they stop for dinner. Both times, the professor waved her away. After another interval, a troop of servants brought in trays of covered plates and pots of tea, leaving them on the sideboard. Simon didn't remember eating, but he assumed they did, because later the servants retrieved the piles of dirty dishes.

The bells were ringing midnight when the professor rose and held out his hands to them both. "We must have you at Awveline, and soon," he said. "I shall speak with your uncle tomorrow."

The old professor slept late and departed for Awveline shortly after luncheon. Simon and Gwyn watched his departure from the sitting room window. Once the carriage disappeared through the gates, Gwyn took Simon's hand. "Come with me," she said, leading him outside.

Simon retained only vague impressions from that walk. The sunlight upon Gwyn's hair. The crunch of autumn leaves. The woodland scents of pines and damp earth and the warm pressure from his sister's hand as she led him deeper into the wilderness.

The next morning, it took three cups of strong coffee before Simon could call himself awake. With Garrett's help, he dressed in his best black suit, then walked the short distance to Emmett's rooms, where Susan had already arrived. Susan's eyes had a dull bruised look, as though she had been weeping for hours.

"You heard about Colin," Simon said.

She jerked her chin in an abbreviated nod. "Emmett came by my rooms last night. Come. We should hurry."

They took a cab to the University's front gates and set a brisk pace across the University grounds to the assembly hall. Even so, they found nearly every seat claimed. At first, Simon took strange comfort in the huge audience, but as he listened to the Provost's long unctuous speech, his mood soured. Colin and Maeve deserved better.

Throughout the assembly, Emmett wept in silence. Susan stared at O'Neill, her dark face grim. Her expression changed only once, when the Provost announced he would suspend classes for a week, in honor of the dead. "In honor of the police and their investigation," she murmured with a bitter smile.

The moment the Provost dismissed them, Susan led them out of the building and onto the green, where crowds of students lingered. "We'll go have a cup of tea," she said. "The three of us. We'll talk or not, but if we do, we'll make more sense than that idiot."

"I'd like that," Emmett said. "Simon, what about you?"

Through the mobs, Simon caught sight of Seán Blake. He immediately looked in the opposite direction, only to see Professor Oswald emerge from the crowds. Oswald immediately made for Simon. "Mr. Madoc. I'm glad to find you here. Would you have time for a short talk?"

Simon glanced at Susan and Emmett. "Certainly, sir."

"We'll come by later," Susan told him.

The faculty quadrant proved to be nearly empty. Simon followed Oswald into the building occupied by the mathematics professors and up the stairs to Oswald's second-story office. Oswald ushered Simon inside, then shut the door and turned the lock.

A general disorder met Simon's eye. Stacks of books covered the long side-table, mixed in with loose papers, covered in calculations. Used cups and saucers were shoved up against the coffee pot and tins of spices, which bore Arabic lettering. More papers covered Oswald's desk as well.

"I heard what happened with you and Moore," Oswald said. "Terrible shock. Terrible. Come, sit." He indicated a chair, which Simon took. "You went to assembly, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know about classes being suspended. Good idea. I'm glad O'Neill decided for it. Last night he wanted to keep up the pretense, but after Rees died. . . ." Oswald sighed. "I'm babbling. The prerogative of old men, just as it is the prerogative of young men to despise that same babbling. So then, let us be forthright. You should know that I'm taking a short sabbatical."

Simon started. "Why, sir?"

"Let us call it a break in habit—one to clear the mind and eye alike." He shot Simon a sharp glance. "Are you worried about your studies?"

"I hardly know, sir."

"So I gather. Well, let us discuss your studies, since those are my chief responsibility. Would you like a cup of tea? No, it seems I have none. Will coffee be acceptable? I brewed a pot not long ago."

Simon accepted a cup of hot, bitter coffee, seasoned with cardamom and lightened by thick cream.

Oswalt filled his own cup and busied himself with the spice tins a moment. "As I said, I'm taking a sabbatical, but I shan't disappear from the University. Unlike my coffee, any worries you have are groundless."

He moved a heap of papers to one side of his desk. Rows and rows of calculations, Simon noticed, as he glanced over them. Then his skin went cold as he recognized the complicated formulae. He had presented these same formulae to Oswalt the previous semester.

And he'd rejected them.

He glanced to see Oswalt studying him with an unsmiling face.

"How goes your research?" Oswalt said.

"It goes . . . with difficulty, sir."

"I warned you about that."

"You did, sir."

Simon took another sip of coffee. He wondered if Oswalt would admit to reviewing Simon's work, but the professor's next comment was about a new monograph from a Frankish mathematician that had caused a stir. They discussed the theory a while. When Simon finished his coffee, Oswalt offered him more, but Simon politely declined.

"Then I must beg your indulgence and bid you good-day," Oswalt said. "I've stumbled upon an interesting line of thinking and would like to mark good progress by the afternoon. But do come again, especially if you have questions concerning your research. I would not like it said that I abandoned my students. And speaking of that, I meant to ask before—how goes it with your sister?"

Simon's stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch at this change in topic. "Not well, sir. But the doctors are hopeful."

Oswalt shook his head. "Then we must hope, but it grieves me to see such a bright promise so lost. So sad . . ."

Their interview trailed off into commonplace exchanges, and Oswalt's repeated assurances that Simon should not hesitate to come again if he had questions. Simon descended the stairs, more dissatisfied with himself than before.

What did I expect? he wondered.

He took a footpath to the nearest gates—away from the University. Away from the recent deaths. The day had turned unseasonably warm; the sun had already burned away the fog, and the sky overhead had cleared to a brassy blue. Outside the University grounds, motorcars and carriages choked the wide avenues. The world in general appeared oblivious to the murders.

"News! News of the day!" A boy in a shabby coat thrust a newssheet at Simon. "News of the day, governor? Death in high places. Scandal in the capital."

Still preoccupied, Simon paid the boy and stuffed the newssheet into his pocket. A horn blatted nearby, and an argument broke out between a cabbie and his customer. Simon hurried down the sidewalk. He had to get away from the crowds and the noise.

He hailed a cab. "To Aonach Sanitarium," he said, climbing inside. "Right, sir."

The cabbie maneuvered his horses and cab into the thoroughfare. Simon settled back and pulled the newssheet from his pocket.

Sensation in Court, read the headlines. A renowned balloonist and scientist, the Queen's presumed lover, had plunged to his death. Causes uncertain. Investigation to be conducted by the Queen's Constabulary.

The rest of the article disappeared into hyperbole and incoherent smudges. Simon crumpled the paper in his hand and looked out the cab's window. As though to confirm the news, a line of blue messenger balloons glided north toward the capital. Idly, he wondered if Dee regretted working on this case and not that of the Queen's lover.

The cab stopped abruptly. The cabbie swore. Ahead, voices rose in complaint, and someone shouted about a blockage in the square. Simon leaned out the window and saw a long motorcade creeping through the plaza. Small pennants lined one car's roof—the mark of a visiting dignitary.

Lord Kiley.

He drew back into the cab, feeling sick. Maeve's father must have arrived by train that morning. Death in high places, indeed.

The noon bells rang, and still the traffic did not move. Simon glanced at the newssheet, but he no longer had any desire to read about Court gossip. He stuffed the paper into his jacket pocket and closed his eyes to wait. The closed cab smelled strongly of sweat, old leather, and horse—it reminded him of the stables at home. Soon he was dozing and hardly noticed when the motorcade eventually departed the square, and the lines of traffic oozed into motion.

He stood on a high peak, his gaze turned upward. Night had fallen. Bright digits, like pinpricks of fire, stippled the dark skies. Simon tilted back his head, trying to take in the entire number . . .

"Aonach Sanitarium," bawled the cabbie, rapping against the cab's roof.

Simon jerked awake. Still groggy, he paid the cabbie and dealt with the gate guards. By the time he reached the main building, his head had cleared.

His visit was unexpected, however, and there was a delay before Doctor Lusk arrived in the lobby. The man frowned, obviously unhappy to see Simon.

"Mr. Madoc. Sir. You realize today is not your regular day. I'm not certain we can accommodate you."

"I realize that," Simon replied. "However, you once mentioned increasing the frequency of our visits, as a means of anchoring her memories."

"True . . ." Lusk frowned again. "Normally I would venture to experiment with our program, but I fear to disturb your expectations. She spent a somewhat restless night."

"I understand," Simon said. "If you might indulge me this once, I promise not to distress her."

Lusk studied him a moment, his round face uncharacteristically pensive. "Perhaps you are right, sir. Perhaps we should not slavishly adhere to Minz's beloved patterns. Come with me."

He dispatched a crew of orderlies to prepare a room for Simon's visit, while he and Simon followed at a much slower pace. "I've requested a different room for this visit," he told Simon. "The room contains an observation window, so that we can watch without Miss Madoc's being aware. Just a precaution, you understand. Do you object?"

They had arrived at the room, and Simon had laid his hand on the door latch. He paused and searched Lusk's face, but found only a doctor's reasonable concern. "No. Not really."

He went inside. Gwyn sat by the window, hands circling through the air as she murmured her numbers. She wore a dress today instead of her usual hospital gown, and someone had brushed and plaited her long fair hair. Simon scanned the walls, noting the small round window at the far end. The observation window.

Gwyn appeared unaware of his presence. She continued to move her hands in a rhythmic pattern, her long fingers catching and stroking the air, as though weaving the sunlight. "Seven," she whispered. "Seven and thirteen and seventeen."

She had returned to the early stages of her illness, when she recited only the simplest primes. Was that a sign of regression? He even recognized the old intensity in her whisper, as though her numbers represented words in a different language. . . .

Simon's skin prickled as he made the connection at last.

"Seven," he said, when she paused briefly. "That's when our parents died."

Gwyn trembled, but did not look in his direction. "Thirteen. Seventeen."

He remembered thirteen, when their uncle arranged a meeting with Glasfryn from Awveline University. Seven and thirteen. These were dates burned into Gwyn's memory, which even madness could not eradicate. But seventeen?

He glanced toward the observation window. *Witnesses be damned*, he thought and crossed the room to Gwyn's side. Gwyn stiffened, her jaw working in sudden alarm. Simon stopped a few paces away and knelt so that his face was level with hers.

"Nineteen," he said softly.

Her eyes widened slightly. Simon waited, hardly daring to breathe. His patience was rewarded when, at last, she whispered, "Twenty-nine."

Keeping his voice calm, he repeated the number.

Again, he had another long wait before Gwyn spoke. "Thirty-one," she whispered. "Thirty-seven."

Simon drew a pencil and the newssheet from his jacket pocket. Gwyn immediately tensed. He waited, motionless, until she calmed down.

This time, he initiated the exchange. "Seven."

"Thirteen."

"Seventeen."

They repeated the sequence, Simon writing down each number in the margins and empty spaces.

“... Thirty-seven. Forty-one. Forty-three.”

The third time through the sequence, Gwyn stirred restlessly, her gaze shifting rapidly from Simon's paper to his face, as though she expected something more. He tried repeating the numbers, but she struck the pencil from his hands. Before he could soothe her, the attendants arrived and led an unusually pliant Gwyn away.

Lusk escorted Simon to the lobby in uncharacteristic silence. “You were right to come, sir,” he said, when they arrived at the front doors. “Quite right. We have made true progress today, you and I and Miss Madoc. Kindness—that is the key to your sister's illness.”

Only part of the solution, Simon thought as he walked along the sanitarium's winding paths, between the stately trees and their rain of falling leaves. A very small part. The true key was written on the smudged sheet of newsprint in his pocket.

That night Simon pored over Gwyn's numbers. He started by applying a series of basic formulae, each designed to expose any underlying patterns. When these proved fruitless, he turned to the newer analysis methods discussed in academic journals. No success. Finally, on a decision based midway between frustration and whimsy, he turned to more fantastical methods—Lîvod's color theories, Frankonia's exploration into the electrical properties of numbers, the latest research from the Prussian Alliance, even ancient treatises from the Egyptian and Persian mystics.

Seven. Thirteen. Seventeen. Nineteen. Twenty-nine. Thirty-one. Thirty-seven. Forty-one. Forty-three.

He found himself doodling numbers on his scrap paper—huge numbers interspersed with smaller ones. Their pattern echoed Gwyn's patterns and recalled his dream of numbers burning like stars across the night. Numbers whose voices sang to him, the notes changing as he transformed them through calculations.

He had Garret brew a pot of strong tea, then requested privacy for the evening. Garret, ever deferential, withdrew to his own rooms.

Simon pulled out a well-thumbed primer on mathematical history. He skimmed the sections on Pythagoras, with his belief in mystical properties; on Fermat and his seemingly logical theory on primes, which had proved false; on Fermat's correspondent, the monk-conjurer Mersenne, and Euclid, who had posited that the list of primes was infinite, and therefore led to immortality.

I wanted my name written in the same list, Simon thought as he turned the page. An arrogant wish, but arrogance seemed a prerequisite for mathematicians, especially those who put forth unpopular theories, such as his own. Dee had mocked him. Oswalt had tried to discourage him, but Simon knew the proper sequence of numbers could transform lives. He distinctly remembered . . .

Cold washed over him. Slowly, he laid down his lead stick and stared at the open book on his desk. The scrap paper was gone—possibly now another crumpled ball upon the floor. Instead, the once-empty margins of his book were decorated with a tapestry of miniscule numbers. When had he written them?

He reached for the book to shut it. Paper crackled inside his breast pocket. Simon stopped, hand hovering above the book. He'd emptied his shirt pockets before the assembly—he was certain of that. *Just another bit of foolscap*, he told himself. He was always storing bits of paper in his pockets. He'd simply forgotten about this one.

He reached inside his pocket. His fingers met a rigid square unlike the usual crumpled note. Hands trembling, he plucked it out and dropped the object onto his desk.

It was a thin packet of stiff brown paper, its edges sealed and one flap folded over to make an envelope. Simon rotated the packet, looking for some marking, a label to indicate its contents. He heard a faint hissing from inside. Cautiously, he tore off the corner and tilted the packet.

A stream of white powder poured onto his desk. He stared at it warily. Not sugar. The grains were too fine. Where had he seen its like before?

You remember. You and Emmett . . .

He wet his forefinger and touched the white pyramid, making a slight dent in its smooth surface. After a moment's hesitation, he transferred a miniscule amount to his tongue.

A sweetish bitter taste filled his mouth. Within a moment, his tongue went numb.

Cocaine. He and Emmett had experimented with it one night, after reading texts from the addict philosophers of the previous century—another of those laughably regrettable incidents from their first year at the University. Simon had forgotten it until now.

Simon closed his eyes. He had no memory of acquiring this substance, and yet he must have. But when?

Certain symbols have a mystical significance, Pythagoras believed. *Our reality is mathematical. Our souls can rise to union with the divine.*

Discounted theories from a long-dead mathematician, sometimes remembered as a genius, persecuted in his own time, whose secret society ended in bloody and violent suppression.

Seven. Thirteen. Seventeen. Nineteen. Twenty-nine. Thirty-one. Thirty-seven. Forty-one. Forty-three.

Now I remember.

The summer of their seventh year, an unusual heat wave muffled Éireann's northern provinces. Every breeze had died off. Even the messenger balloons appeared stranded, and the buzz from their engines set the air vibrating, as though from gargantuan mosquitoes. Simon and Gwyn spent their hours in their playroom, or in subdued conversation with their aunt and uncle, who had come to supervise them while their parents traveled on holiday through Italy.

The news came on a Monday. That day, the skies were empty of balloons; the sun was a bright smudge against the dull sheets of clouds. Simon and Gwyn had retreated to the mansion's cool cellars with boxes of colored chalk. Simon drew a series of squares, then rectangles, then circles. Whatever came to mind.

Gwyn worked more deliberately. She brushed the wall clear of grit, then laid out her pieces of chalk with care. Simon paused from his draw-

ing to watch as she sketched the gardens surrounding their house. It was more than just a picture—woven in between the lush foliage and graceful trees, he could pick out a three curling between the branches like a snake, a six that also looked like a ripple in the pond, a seven disguised as the gardener's scythe.

"Master Simon. Miss Gwyn."

Gwyn paused, her chalk poised above the next number. Simon, always obedient, called back, "Down here, Sally."

He expected her to give the usual retort, "That's Miss Sally to you, scamps." Instead, Sally clattered down the stairs, her face pale and her eyes bright with tears. "Come quick, Master and Miss," was all she said. With gentle hands, she laid aside Gwyn's chalk, brushed down their clothes, and smoothed their tousled hair. No time for washing their faces. It didn't matter, she said as she led them upstairs and into the grand front parlor, before retreating with a final whispered encouragement.

Their aunt and uncle sat on the magnificent sofa where their parents so often entertained guests. With a twinge of apprehension, Simon took in his uncle's black suit, his aunt's black veil and dress, unrelieved by any jewels.

Uncle Niall stood and held out his arms. "Simon. Gwyn. Come here."

When neither one moved, he glanced at his wife, as though puzzled how to proceed. Aunt Sophie swept her veil to one side and knelt. "Simon. Gwyn, love. I have terrible news."

Their parents had died, she told them. The cause had been a freak accident—two balloons colliding in mid-air had scattered their wreckage over the train rails in the remote Italian countryside. Moments later, a train had rounded a curve, and despite the engineer's efforts, the engine had derailed and plunged into a ravine, taking all the passenger cars, and Simon and Gwyn's parents, with it. There had been no survivors.

"You'll stay here, in your own home," Aunt Sophie said. "We'll take care of you, I promise. Your Mama and Papa made every provision for your upbringing."

Simon opened his mouth. He wanted to say something, but his throat and chest hurt too much. Gwyn went rigid. She stared at their aunt and uncle, her pale blue eyes bright and angry. "No," she whispered. "That's not true. Not true. Not true. Not—"

She turned and fled. That night, Simon heard her whispering the same words as they both pretended to sleep.

Simon flung the cocaine out the window and went to bed. He had no dreams, for which he was grateful, but when he awoke, a strange lethargy enveloped him. He washed his face, shaved, and ordered a hearty breakfast. Coffee and eggs revived him, and he set to work at once.

The greatest purification of all is disinterested science, Pythagoras said. It is the man who devotes himself to that who is the true philosopher. Who frees himself from the wheel of birth.

He worked from mid-morning to midnight and later, drinking pot after pot of strong tea brewed by the faithful Garrett, while searching for the key to Gwyn's numbers.

Late on the third morning, a loud knocking broke into his concentration. Simon paused, his pencil poised to finish off an equation, expecting Garret to answer the door.

But Garret did not appear, and another series of knocks rattled the door. "Simon! Simon! Open up, man."

Emmett. He sounded panicked. Simon rose, unsteady from sitting so long. He had the strange impression of doubled voices, and though the hour bells were just ringing, he was convinced they'd rung not five minutes ago. He smoothed back his hair, arranged his pencils, and hastily covered up his worksheets.

And stopped, his heart racing.

A snowy white pyramid, the size of his thumbnail, occupied the center of his desk.

"Simon! Open the door, or I'll get the key from Mrs. Dugan."

Simon covered his eyes with his palms, willing himself to see nothing but blackness. No cocaine. No numbers. No dizziness after which the day had mysteriously dissolved into night. Emmett showered more knocks against his door, jerking him back to the present. "I hear you, Emmett. Give me just a moment."

He swept the cocaine into an old envelope and shoved it into his desk drawer. With a damp rag, he wiped his desktop clean, then tossed the rag into the waste bin and stirred up the contents. A glance into the mirror showed that his face was pale but otherwise ordinary. He rubbed his hands over his trousers, then opened the door.

Emmett stood in the corridor, shoulders hunched, hands shoved into his coat pockets. Except for a stark white shirt collar, his clothes were entirely black. Simon gestured for Emmett to come inside, but Emmett did not move. "They held Colin's wake yesterday," he said in a clipped voice. "Why didn't you come?"

"I—I didn't know."

"They sent a notice around."

A red haze washed over his vision, and his stomach roiled. He wished he'd not drunk quite so much tea the night before. "I haven't been well, Emmett."

"So Garret told me," Emmett said, still in that hard voice. "And Mrs. Dugan. So that is the excuse I gave Commander Dee, when we spoke at Maeve's funeral."

Pennants fluttering atop the long black motorcar. Lord Kiley, come to fetch his daughter's body home. Dee saying, We've had another death.

"Simon!"

Simon flinched. His gaze swung immediately to his desk. He half-expected to see the cocaine again, but the desk remained innocently clear.

Emmett stared past him into the room. His expression softened to concern, looking more like his usual self. "What's wrong, Simon? Can you tell me? Is it because of the murders?"

"Nothing." Simon swallowed against the dryness clogging his throat and tried again. "Nothing that sleep and right food won't cure."

An awkward pause. Emmett shifted on his feet and glanced away. "I see. Well. The other reason I came was that we're holding a wake our-

selves, a private one, for Maeve and Colin together. It's tonight, at Bantry's Pub. You should come."

"Bantry's," Simon repeated. Then a shadow crossed his vision, and he distinctly heard Emmett say, "I'm sorry you're too ill to come. Shall I stop by tomorrow?" and his own answer, "Yes. Please do."

When Emmett had gone, Simon closed the door and leaned against it, eyes squeezed shut. "It's nothing," he whispered. "I'm unsettled. My nerves strained. Nothing more."

He stumbled into his bedroom and lay down. Hours later, he woke with a start, sweating, his heart beating against his ribs. His rooms were dark, the air stale and cold. A rapping sounded at his door—a steady rhythm as though someone had been at it a while.

Emmett.

Simon rolled from the bed, calling out, "Just a moment."

He scrubbed his face with cold water and pulled on a fresh shirt and trousers. The cocaine had not mysteriously reappeared. Calmer now, he opened the door, ready to face Emmett.

But it was Susan who stood outside. Susan with her plain black skirt and white pleated blouse, her dark face serious. "Simon," she said. "You must not do it."

He blinked, confused. "Do what?"

She gestured sharply, taking in his appearance and the cluttered room behind him. "Make yourself a recluse. I haven't seen you in three days. Emmett tried calling on you yesterday, but you wouldn't answer the door. He said you were ill. Bollocks."

"Susan . . ."

"Don't." Her voice scaled up, and she made an obvious effort to regain her control. "Don't lie to me, Simon. I know you're grieving for Maeve and Colin. We all are. I just came to ask—to say that you should not hide from your friends."

With that, she turned and fled down the stairs. Moments later, the outside door banged open and shut.

Simon closed the door and turned back to his rooms. Only a day had passed since Emmett's morning visit, but a veneer of dust coated the floors, and his rooms had an odd neglected look. Where had Garret disappeared to?

Emmett tried calling, but you wouldn't answer.

Simon's gaze veered to his desk. The cocaine had returned.

He had trouble remembering much after that. Morning. Night. Afternoon. The hours flickered past his eyes like pages of a book. Once he found himself crouched over his wastebasket, retching. Another time, he massaged his cramped hands, studying a list of numbers. Moments later, he stood in his bedroom, drinking coffee, bemused to find himself dressed and shaved.

He was still gazing at his carpet when someone tapped at his door. Emmett or Susan, he thought. Or possibly the long-absent Garret.

But his visitor was Adrian Dee, looking grim and weary. "You must come with me, sir."

"Why? More questions?"

"More questions than I like, sir. I cannot tell you more until we reach the precinct office."

Dee helped him into his overcoat and led him outside, where a cab with a uniformed policeman waited.

"Am I under arrest?" Simon demanded.

"No, Mr. Madoc. Not unless you give us reason."

Dee remained silent throughout the long uncomfortable drive to the precinct house. Fatigue lined his face, making him look much older than he had that first day, when they walked along the Blackwater. Simon noted a scar below Dee's left temple and faint hatchmarks beside his eyes. How many years had he served in the Queen's Constabulary? And why had his superiors assigned him to this obscure murder case?

They arrived just as the sun was sliding behind the precinct house, which stood on a prominence overlooking the Blackwater. Dee dismounted first and scanned the walkway. When Simon climbed down, the detective took him by the elbow and hurried him inside.

Policemen and their charges filled the precinct lobby—tramps and beggars, a woman with gaudy makeup, a nervous man in evening dress explaining his possession of a gun. Dee guided Simon up the nearest stairwell, along a deserted corridor, and into a waiting room. He closed the door and pointed to a chair. "Sit."

Simon hesitated. He had expected the same scene as last time—the several uniformed policemen standing along the walls, the assistants writing notes, another of Dee's colleagues listening in. Instead, they were alone, and Dee himself remained silent, his narrowed gaze upon Simon.

"The newest victim is Susan Liddell," Dee said abruptly.

For a moment, Simon's mind went blank. Then the blood drained from his face and he sank into the chair. "Susan? When? How?"

Dee studied him a moment before answering. "Last night. Very late, if our witnesses are telling the truth. The coroner is confirming their testimony."

Susan. Dead.

Simon leaned his head against his hands. "That's not possible," he whispered. "She visited me this afternoon. No, wait. She came by yesterday."

Dee gave no reaction, except that his features turned a shade more rigid. "Tell me everything you did this past week. Leave nothing out."

"I . . . I spent them in my rooms."

"The entire five days? Doing what?"

Another wave of vertigo passed over Simon. He steadied himself against the tabletop and managed to meet Dee's eyes. "Research. Studying."

"For your thesis?"

"Yes. That and . . . something that concerns my sister."

Dee regarded him steadily. "Susan Liddell was last seen in the mathematics library. She bid the librarian good-night just as the clock struck ten. The librarian looked out the window and saw a man waiting outside by the lamppost. Miss Liddell and he spoke, then walked off together. The librarian said he had only a glimpse of the man's face, but he swears it was you."

"Impossible," Simon whispered. "I never went there. My manservant can testify—"

Dee stopped him with a gesture. "We spoke with Thomas Garret. You dismissed him two days ago, he claims. We also spoke with your landlady. Mrs. Dugan and the chambermaid both agree that you remained in your rooms throughout the day, but they cannot guarantee your whereabouts after sunset."

Simon felt a trickle of sweat down his spine. "I did not leave my rooms, Commander. I—besides, my studies, I was quite ill, Commander. Ask Emmett Moore. He came to my rooms."

Dee nodded. "We know. As did Miss Liddell. She spoke with Mr. Moore yesterday morning. She was concerned, as was he, about your health. He did not say it outright, but Mr. Moore thought you had had dealings with Mr. Blake."

"That's a lie," Simon burst out. He stood up hastily, knocking over the chair. Simon righted the chair, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I can only say I'm upset. Any man would be with his friends dying and his sister—" But he would not speak of Gwyn to this man. "Never mind about my sister. I've enough to upset me these past three days."

"Five," Dee said softly.

"Three or five or twenty-five. Does it matter? My friends are dead, and you accuse me of being their murderer."

"But I don't."

Simon stopped. He had been circling the table, unaware that he did so. Now he faced Dee across the table. One of the windows had been opened a crack. He heard carriage wheels clattering over the paving stones. A thin breeze filtered into the stuffy room. "You don't?"

"No." Dee watched him closely. His gaze was bright, disquieting in its intensity. "We have contradictory testimony, Mr. Madoc. We have other evidence I cannot share with you. Suffice to say that we do not have adequate proof to arrest you."

"Then why bring me here?"

"To question you. Someone murdered Susan Liddell. Someone who knew her quite well, and that is telling you more than I should."

Simon rubbed his hand over his numb face. "I wish I could help you."

"So do I, Mr. Madoc. So do I. Now, please, sit. I have a few more questions."

A few questions turned into several dozen. Once more, Dee led Simon through the past week. When had he entered his rooms? Who brought him meals? On which day did Emmett Moore visit him? Had Mr. Moore appeared distressed? What about Miss Liddell?

"Did you know that Mr. Moore and Miss Liddell had been lovers?"

Simon gripped the table's edge to steady himself. "Lovers? No. I had no idea. I thought—" He eyed Dee, suddenly suspicious. "Are you certain?"

"We are certain, Mr. Madoc. We have that information directly from Mr. Moore."

Simon opened and closed his mouth, unable to respond to that information. Dee watched him in silence. When he resumed his questions, they seemed to come at random, skipping over the past week, then sud-

denly leaping to years before, including his first meeting with Emmett Moore. Gradually, as he answered questions about Emmett's recent behavior, Simon's panic receded, replaced by a realization that brought him no comfort.

They think Emmett murdered Susan.

At last, Dee let out a sigh. "Enough. We've had a long day, you and I, Mr. Madoc."

"Am I free to go, then?"

"Yes. But remember, the investigation continues. I would prefer that you not leave Awveline City."

"Of course, Commander. I only meant that I was tired and would be grateful for some sleep."

"That you may have, Mr. Madoc."

A policeman called a cab for Simon and escorted him home. The ride back to his boarding house remained a blurred series of images. Moonlight alternating with clouds. Dusky purple skies. Faint stars pricking the darkness. Long shadows stretching over the roadway. He was vaguely aware of the policeman helping him inside. Even with the man's assistance, it took Simon three tries to unlock his door, but at last he was inside. Safe and alone.

He scanned his rooms quickly. Nothing extraordinary met his sight. Books, papers, and furniture all looked the same. Aside from Tom Garrett's strange absence, his rooms looked as though the past few days had not occurred.

Save that Susan is dead, and the police suspect Emmett.

He dropped into the chair by his desk. After a moment's hesitation, he yanked open the drawer and searched through its contents. Keys. Slips of paper with numbers scribbled upon them. An inkpot. A pair of dice he and Emmett used to play statistics games. But no white packet of strange powder.

Simon shoved the drawer closed and rested his head upon his hands. *I was upset. Confused. Nothing more.*

Work. He needed to work. To distract himself from the news about Susan and Gwyn. He reached blindly for the nearest book: *Numerical Theories of the Syrians*.

For an hour, he was able to lose himself in reading and making notes. As one reference led him to another, he pulled out other books, until he had an untidy heap upon his desk. Metaphysical properties. Particles of thought. Time streams. The various theories hung in his mind, vivid and clear. It seemed that he had finally found the necessary strands to pull his theories together. . . .

The vision wavered. The brightly colored strands of his reasoning unraveled into a handful of nothing.

"Damn," he whispered. "Damn. Damn. Damn to all eternity."

He pushed back his chair and stood. He'd go mad if he stayed alone much longer. He pulled on a hat, gloves, and overcoat as he walked out the door. There was no question of visiting Emmett, not with Dee's questions fresh in his thoughts. But Oswalt—Oswalt had told Simon to visit if he had questions.

Those aren't the questions you have.

Those are the ones I can bear to ask.

The cab dropped him off within a few streets of Oswald's house, and Simon continued the last distance on foot. Oswald lived in a genteel neighborhood of aging gabled houses. Most of the windows were brightly lit, but the streets themselves were quiet and the sidewalks empty. A line of yellow haloes marked the procession of streetlamps.

Oswald's house stood on a corner, somewhat apart from its neighbors and shielded by a high wall of bushes. Simon paused on the sidewalk, where a brick walkway led up to the front porch. Lamplight glowed in one of the upper windows, but downstairs all was dark. He puffed out his breath in frustration and stamped his feet, suddenly aware how quickly they'd grown numb.

A fool's errand, he thought. Oswald might be awake, but he certainly wasn't receiving visitors at this hour.

He turned away, ready to go directly home, but stopped when a light flared in the downstairs parlor window. A silhouette appeared before the curtains. Simon recognized Oswald by the silvery halo of hair around his head. Moments later, the glow brightened as Oswald lit the parlor's lamps.

Now a second, taller figure appeared by the window. Curious, and somewhat apprehensive, Simon took a few steps along the front walkway. Who else had chosen to visit and rouse Oswald from his early evening? Another student? Adrian Dee?

He left the walkway and ventured closer to the parlor window. If anyone looked out from that brightly lit room, they would not see him in the darkness.

Luck was with him. Oswald had left the window open a crack, and he heard their voices clearly.

"Not possible." That was Oswald.

"But sir, surely you've read the theories—"

"And just as surely I've read their refutations, Mr. Moore."

Emmett. Why had Emmett come here? Oswald was not his advisor. And surely he would have remained at home, mourning Susan's loss.

Simon crouched down, his head spinning from the onslaught of suspicion. Above him, the voices continued their conversation, but he could barely attend. They were arguing—something about formulae and the properties of numbers.

"Prime numbers," Emmett said, his voice taking on that eager tone when he'd lighted upon a new and exciting idea. "You yourself wrote a paper on the subject."

"Years ago," Oswald said. "Others have since disproved the theory."

"True. But remember the new research from Lïvod and Dietsch—"

"Incomplete—"

"Not incomplete."

There was a heavy pause, and Simon could picture the glower on Oswald's face. It was a look that intimidated less confident students. Emmett himself apparently required a few moments before he could continue.

"Begging your pardon and your indulgence, sir, but the evidence is not incomplete. Here are the newest papers, delivered just this week from a community of Iranian scholars. Have you read them, sir?"

"Not yet, Mr. Moore. I was engaged in my own research."

"As was I, sir. One very similar to your own, I would imagine."

Oswalt snorted. "Indeed." A pause followed. "Mr. Madoc is your intimate friend, I believe."

"Mr. Madoc is my dear friend and a respected colleague, sir."

A long unbroken silence followed. Then Oswalt cleared his throat. "I'm glad you came to me, Mr. Moore. Come with me, we shall go to my offices tonight. I have some papers to share with you—"

Oswalt broke off with an exclamation. Simon heard Emmett's shout, several thuds, then another broken-off cry. Without thinking, he raced to the front porch and flung the door open. A silent dark foyer met his eye. Cautiously he stepped inside, his heart beating hard against his chest. He heard a rustling sound from within the parlor and laid a hand on the latch.

The door swung open to reveal a brightly lit parlor. Two dark shapes lay motionless upon the carpet, one with thin white hair, one with blond hair, bleached to silver in the brilliant lamplight.

Emmett. Oswalt. But that means —

A table crashed to the ground. A man burst from behind the couch and ran full tilt into Simon. They both tumbled to the floor, arms and legs flailing as they wrestled. Then Simon broke free and rolled to his feet. The next moment the stranger had done the same.

He was a tall man, with pale blond hair escaping from underneath a thick scarf, which enveloped his throat and face. His light blue eyes glittered in the moonlight. He could almost be Emmett's brother.

With a muffled cry, the stranger dropped the knife and ran.

Simon darted after him. "Stop!"

"Stop!" cried another voice.

Dee. In relief, Simon swung around. "Commander. Thank the Lord—"

Dee stepped over the threshold, his gun aimed at Simon's chest. "Simon Madoc, I order you to yield. Give me the knife, sir. I promise that it will go better if you cooperate. Come, lay the knife down. You know you have not a chance."

Simon edged away. "What are you talking about? Didn't you see the man? He's the one who killed—"

With a shock, he realized he gripped a knife in his hands.

Simon twitched his hand open. The knife spun toward Dee, who dropped to one knee and fired. Simon twisted away, but not in time. Bright pain blossomed in his shoulder. In panic, he stumbled down the hall and made it through the back door a few steps ahead of Dee.

A policeman loomed to his right. Simon swung a punch and connected. The pain in his shoulder nearly brought him to his knees. Ahead, he saw another figure darting through the gate and into the alley. Simon drew a sobbing breath and ran.

Dawn came as a dark red haze.

Simon pressed his hands against his eyes, trying to contain the pressure inside. He'd spent half the night chasing and chased. Twice he had spotted the murderer, and twice Dee's men had nearly captured Simon. Finally he'd taken refuge in a derelict stable, deep in Awveline's slum district.

He tilted his head back and breathed in the dusty air. His shoulder ached fiercely where Dee had shot him, and dried blood pulled at his skin. It would be only a matter of hours before Dee and his patrols located Simon. They would charge him with murder, try him, and execute him. He no longer tried to deny the charge. The knife lay at his feet, though he remembered clearly dropping it in Oswalt's house. He also remembered a stranger fleeing with the same knife in his hand. Three memories, all vivid. Which one was true?

"Seven," he whispered. "Thirteen. Seventeen." He paused and listened a moment. A pattering against the doors and broken shutters told him that rain was falling. A faint silver light seeped around the shutters. Day had arrived.

"Nineteen. Twenty-nine. Thirty-one—Fuck! Damnable fucking numbers!"

A coughing fit overtook him. Simon fumbled in his jacket pocket for his handkerchief. His fingers met a square packet.

"No," he whispered. "That's not possible."

With a quick jerk, Simon pulled out the packet and ripped off one corner. He poured the contents into his hand. He hesitated a moment, then tipped back his head and poured the cocaine into his mouth.

A bittersweet taste filled his mouth. His stomach heaved in protest. Choking, he managed to force the powder down his throat.

His tongue went numb. Next came the tremors, which shook him so hard that his fist knocked against his teeth, and he tasted blood. His chest felt tight, as though a vise gripped him. Hard to breathe, hard to —

I had trouble finding you.

Midnight in the orchard. A bright half-moon illuminated the trees with clouds of light. Simon held Gwyn tight against his chest to quiet her trembling. Her hair smelled of new apple blossoms. Underneath, however, lay the distinct scent of fear.

What is wrong, Gwyn? What happened?

I can't sleep, thinking about numbers. Remember what Pythagoras said, about numbers and the soul. What the mystics said about the paths our lives take. Numbers. . .

One memory blurred into the next. Memories of comforting Gwyn after her nightmares. Memories of rigorous arguments, where each delivered their reasoning in dispassionate tones. Memories of a life shared so completely that Simon often wondered if their separate bodies were just an illusion.

Look, Simon.

Images of the moonlit orchard overlaid those of the stable. Even as he watched, the silver-dappled leaves faded into stone, and the moonlight dulled to a rain-soaked dawn.

The murderer crouched opposite Simon. His long hair hung in wet tangles over his face. Simon scrambled to his feet and snatched up the knife. The man did not acknowledge him at all as he poured out a quantity of white powder onto his palm.

Breathless, Simon watched him swallow the cocaine. The stranger wore his face, with all the differences age would make. Silver threaded the fair golden hair. Faint lines radiated from his eyes and mouth. The flesh along his jaw drooped slightly. A handsome man just entering middle age.

Simon put a hand to his own shirt pocket and found the cocaine packet. No longer surprised, he poured out the entire contents and swallowed them. When the stranger rose and walked out the door, so did he.

Outside, the slums had vanished into a haze. Simon and his twin walked along a strange path lined with dense green foliage. Above, stars burned like digits of a never-ending number.

They came to an intersection, where a dozen paths curved toward the horizon. Impossible, Simon thought. The Earth curved, certainly, but the unaided eye could not discern it. He glanced toward one of the branches.

They were nineteen. Sunlight, falling through the leaves, cast green shadows upon Gwyn's face, which had the luminescence of youth.

"The past is not immutable," she said.

"How?" Simon demanded. "You've not proved your theories."

"I don't have to. We prove it by living. Our parents proved it by dying."

They stood by the sunken gardens, underneath a stand of ornamental trees. The late summer sun glittered upon the pool, and a bright haze filled the air, making the trees and foliage beyond appear indistinct. Simon blinked and rubbed his eyes. Paused. Gwyn had gone silent, and he sensed a difference in the air. When he glanced back to his sister, he saw creases beside her eyes and strands of silver in her hair.

Thirty-seven.

Colin Rees bent over a workbench, delicately twining copper wires onto a perforated board. Maeve standing by a tall desk, writing out columns of numbers. . . .

Forty-one.

The same room, but a different day. He and Gwyn stood by a table, which was hidden beneath an enormous sheet of paper. Lines covered the paper in a complex grid of red and black and blue. Green circles marked certain intersections; their distribution made a pattern that Simon could not quite grasp.

Gwyn was speaking in low urgent tones. "I thought Douglas could manage. He and I discussed it. I judged the risk acceptable."

"You're letting emotion distort your judgment."

"Not this time," Gwyn insisted. "Look. Forget the ordinary intersections. We've already identified the ones that matter. Here—" Her finger hovered above one of the green circles. "And here. And here."

Seven. Thirteen. Seventeen. Nineteen. Twenty-nine . . .

"I know that," Simon said. "But we have not identified all the permutations of twenty-three. Until we do, the path remains incomplete, and we cannot risk making even one journey."

"141955329," Gwyn said crisply. "Times two. Exponent 25267. Add one.

Oswalt confirmed the latest pair of primes yesterday. He said that true pioneers cannot always wait for absolute knowledge before testing their theories. You used to believe that yourself."

"In a different timeline," Simon murmured. "A safer one."

"This one *is* safe." She jabbed her finger at the intersection marked twenty-three. "Colin ran the new primes using the same formulae. The results looked promising. Take the route through this intersection, and we have a clear path to the day in question. Alter one conversation—just one—and that balloonist might have known about the high winds that day. He might have—" She stopped, drew a deep breath. "He would have chosen a different route and avoided the accident. Our parents would have lived."

"What about the permutations?" Simon asked softly.

Gwyn set her mouth into a thin white line. "Close enough."

"Obviously not."

Tears brightened her eyes. "Obviously not. Simon, we were so close, and when Douglas volunteered . . ."

It was Douglas Kerr who first had the idea of using prime numbers in their work. Harry Sullivan and Agnes Doyle had researched the formulae they needed, and Colin Rees had designed and built calculators to speed their computations. Timothy Morgan had alighted upon the inspiration of linking the human brain with the machine. From there, Emmett, Maeve, and Oswalt had begun to map out a viable path through the past. But it was Gwyn who deduced they could use a combination of numbers and drugs and electricity, just as the old mathematician-conjurors had claimed.

"We can start with cocaine," she told the others. "And test its effects on varying levels of current."

The results had proved terrifying. And effective.

We used our madness and our genius, Susan used to say, *and from that we would benefit mankind.*

Simon took his sister into his arms. "Hush, Gwyn. We'll get Douglas back and try again next—after we check the numbers more thoroughly."

She made an involuntary noise. Warned, Simon took a step backward and studied his sister's expression. "What? What else happened? Tell me."

Gwyn opened and closed her mouth. "Time fractures," she said with obvious difficulty.

Simon drew a sharp breath. He'd read about the theories and discounted them. And yet, the concept of time fractures was no more fantastical than his and Gwyn's own theory that said timelines followed the curvature of space, bending gradually over vast distances and meeting themselves again at different points.

"I'll have to go back myself," he said.

Gwyn's mouth tensed. She was speaking again, but Simon could not make out the words. Something about patterns overlaying other patterns and creating chaos in the time streams.

"Too late." Gwyn's voice was a disembodied whisper. "We were too late to save them."

"How do you know?" Simon asked.

Of their collaboration, only he, Gwyn, Oswalt, and Emmett Moore remained. Timothy Morgan had followed Douglas Kerr through the timelines, never to return. Lost, Simon told himself. Reluctantly, he'd allowed Agnes Doyle and Harry Sullivan to launch an expedition to recover their colleagues, but, instead, they were the next to vanish—their existence blotted out when two timelines re-converged. At that, Simon ordered the equipment locked up, and the experiment shut down. To his dismay, Maeve defied those orders, convinced she had the key to their problems. When Susan, mad with grief, chased after her friend to prevent another death, she too died. Time had fractured, and the paths no longer ran true.

"We cannot do *nothing*," he said to Gwyn. "I must go—"

"But Simon—"

"I'll take the same path as Douglas," he said, speaking over her. "I'll find him and do whatever is needed to remove the fracture."

Gwyn pressed her hands against her cheeks. She made no objections, however, and when Simon gestured for her to assist him in preparing their apparatus, she did so, albeit silently.

One moment of inspiration, Simon thought, as he tapped the keys rapidly. Decades of necessary research and experimentation had followed, but it was that initial insight that counted most. Strange to think that that same moment intersected so many other timelines. It had taken the best minds in Éireann's universities to invent the necessary formulae for traversing those lines, and more complicated formulae with ever higher primes to calculate all the factors involved in shifting those lines to alter the past.

Gwyn injected the cocaine and counted until the drug penetrated his bloodstream. Simon waited until she gave the signal before he pressed the last digit and set the last control. His gaze met Gwyn's. She managed a smile, however unconvincing. Then Simon pressed the switch to connect the electrical current.

Darkness. The scent of raw earth and pine needles crushed underfoot. He walked by instinct, having made a brief essay with the machine before, when they had first tested its capabilities. Even so, he found the lack of physical indicators unsettling. The vivid scents, the cold prickling his face, the pinpoint stars, were all trace memories, Professor Oswalt claimed. Perhaps that accounted for the sensation of being doubled, as though another presence existed within his mind.

It did. It will. It does.

He paused and looked back the way he had come. A short distance behind him, the path split in two, each branch leading to a different future. With a chill, Simon could make out thread-like strands beside each branch, signaling further confusion in time.

I'm not too late, he told himself. If he intercepted Douglas before the crisis, time would heal itself, or so his research indicated. Even now, the worst would be a blurring of the past. Events doubled. Contradictory memories. Nothing fatal.

His pulse beat an irregular rhythm. Down each strand of time, another of his selves existed. He was doubled and tripled, each self bound to the other through a tenuous connection. When he glanced back, he could

swear the strands grew more numerous. Was time unraveling toward the future and Gwyn?

He hurried down the path. With every step, the air turned thicker, pressing against his lungs. Voices whispered in the paths beside his. No, it was a single voice, speaking different words, depending on which direction Simon tilted his head.

Time fractures.

He could re-enter time at the next intersection. Oswalt's calculations predicted a narrow crack, corresponding to the prime number pair. Twin primes, he called them.

But Oswalt had stolen his theories. Borrowed them for his own research, he called it. Or had he simply refined the formulae and shared them with Simon and Gwyn? Simon found it harder to remember which version was true. The voices distracted him, and the pressure had grown almost unbearable, drilling into his temples.

Panicked, he stumbled forward. He heard a roaring ahead, a cataract of time, spilling through the cracks into the world. If only he could reach it before he died from the agony. That was how Agnes had died. And Douglas. And . . .

He fell through the tunnel's diaphanous walls into a muddy clearing. A cold wind swept through his clothes. His hands stung from the fall. Strange noises and images assailed him. Raucous cries overhead. Misshapen shadows blotting out the sun. Then, in the midst of strangeness, a human voice.

"Simon? Is that you, Simon?"

Simon twitched and spun around. He saw her now, a beautiful girl with golden hair, fair skin, and eyes like the bluest summer skies. She came toward him, her expression anxious, and spoke again, but all Simon could think was that her skin must be warm and silken to the touch, and he needed her, needed her more than he could express. With an inarticulate cry, he rushed toward the girl to bury himself inside her warmth.

Gwyn. Sweet Gwyn. What have I done?

When he came to, he was stumbling along a muddy path. Stars winked overhead between the budding trees, and a heavy watery scent filled the air. He was cold. Hungry. Terrified and bruised. Someone had attacked him. Simon had fought off the man and snatched away his knife. What came next was unclear. He only remembered that he came across a different man, walking alone by the river. Memory flickered. He recognized Douglas Kerr. Must stop Douglas. Must.

He blinked and saw a knife flashing through the darkness. He blinked again, and a woman's shriek reverberated in his skull.

No!

He opened his eyes, the word still echoing in his ears. For a moment, he could not focus on his surroundings. Gradually he took in scattered details. Crows taking flight overhead. The craggy trunks of the oak trees. The gamekeeper's hut. The scent of wood smoke and approaching snow. Leaves crackled in the distance. Someone was coming.

"Simon? Is that you, Simon?"

Gwyn.

Lines radiated from the point where he stood, shimmering in the cold clear winter light. He saw himself walking toward Gwyn, in three, four, a dozen directions. One future to invent a new machine so that he and others might travel through time. One to . . .

"One to heal," he whispered. He glanced up, and across the wavering lines of the future, he saw a solitary red balloon, gliding toward the sun.

Simon's fingers closed over the knife hilt. He set the blade against his throat.

"One," he whispered. "Exponent one. Minus . . ." His hand shook. "Minus one."

A quick strong movement.

A spray of blood.

Simon. Where are you, Simon?

Here. Oh, Gwyn, I nearly lost you. I nearly lost myself.

Hush. It's all right. I'm glad you came back from the University. I have some new equations to show you.

But Gwyn, we have to be careful—

Yes, my love, I know that now. Come with me.

She took him by the hand and led him along the woodland path. ○

REIKO

she lost her face at Nagasaki
she wears scarves and hats
she does not speak

between her breasts
there is a tattoo
of the face she had

this face has brown eyes
a careful smile
and straight black hair

it is the only face
she shows her lover
it sheds her only tear.

—W. Gregory Stewart



CENTURY RAINby **Alastair Reynolds**

Ace, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-441-01290-6

Alastair Reynolds has been one of the most visible writers of the new brand of space opera coming out of Britain. (He now makes his home in the Netherlands, after twelve years working for the European Space Agency.) His "Revelation Space" trilogy combined the galaxy-wide scope of the Doc Smith era with cutting-edge science (e.g., brane theory) and a tough modern sensibility. With *Century Rain*, he tries his hand at work on a more intimate scale—although only by comparison with his previous work.

Century Rain is set in a future where Earth has been destroyed—or, more precisely, been made inhospitable for life. A few survivors—descendants of those who'd already moved to homes in orbit or on other worlds—now carry on a long-drawn-out struggle to define the future of humanity in their own terms. One of the two competing factions has decided to abandon Earth entirely. The other sends archaeological expeditions to try to recover artifacts of the vanished civilization from the still-hostile planet. Verity Auger, one of the archaeologists, loses a VIP guest during a recovery expedition, and finds herself in hot water. Her superiors offer her an even more dangerous assignment as a way to save herself.

A second plot strand takes place in what looks at first much like

Paris of the early 1950s, where an American expat named Floyd moonlights as a private eye when he's not following his primary calling as a jazz musician. It quickly becomes clear, though, that this is the Paris of some alternate history, in which an oppressive right-wing nationalist regime holds power. Neither Americans nor their music carry the cachet they did in France in our own history.

Floyd's troubles start when he agrees to investigate the death of a young woman, whom we eventually learn is an agent from Auger's world, sent to collect artifacts from his world because of its close similarity to the "real" past. Unsurprisingly, Auger's mission turns out to be a visit to Floyd's world to find out why the other agent died and to recover any remaining artifacts. The plot kicks into high gear when the two of them learn that the catastrophe that overtook Auger's Earth is in store for Floyd's world.

Page-turning tension, good world-building, and a scope that suddenly opens up to a much wider perspective than the reader at first realizes. This one solidifies Reynolds' position as one of the most readable new writers in the field.

ALANYA TO ALANYAby **L. Timmel Duchamp**

Aqueduct Press \$19.00 (tp)

ISBN: 0-9746559-6-1

L. Timmel Duchamp's short fiction has frequently appeared in this magazine as well as in various an-

thologies. Now we have her first novel, which begins a five-book series, the "Marq'ssan Cycle," dealing with a feminist revolt against an oppressive future society, a sort of corporate dictatorship. Written some twenty years ago and set aside, the series seems even more striking in light of political events of the intervening years.

The precipitating event of the plot is the arrival on Earth of aliens, who announce their presence by shutting down the world's power grid. Having thus gained the notice of the world's governments, the Marq'ssan issue their demand: a team of negotiators, comprised entirely of women, is to be sent to them. The main protagonist, Kay Zeldin, is a college professor chosen for the US negotiating team because of her former ties to the US Security Chief, Robert Sedgewick. Sedgewick makes it clear to Zeldin that he expects her to act as a spy for the US regime.

Zeldin is already ambivalent about advancing the interests of the government, having left government service to pursue marriage and a career. But Sedgewick and his fellow "executives" look on mere "professionals" like her as a sort of lower species, driven by hormones. And in spite of strong evidence, they dismiss the Marq'ssan as impostors, more likely human terrorists than real aliens. Even after the Marq'ssan show their power by destroying government buildings and property, the executives are unwilling to negotiate openly. Instead, they respond with force—calling out the Army to enforce order, and demonstrating their power by raping women who overstep their submissive roles.

The Marq'ssan appear to the negotiators as human women, although several scenes suggest that their

real appearance is quite different. They carry on with apparently endless discussion and negotiation, trying to give Earth's women the perspective to acquire power on their own terms. But those are not their only weapons; as in their initial demonstration, they destroy buildings, armaments, and other assets of the oppressive governments of Earth. A group of them begin to side with the more activist groups among Earth's women, and take direct steps such as releasing prisoners and destroying buildings that are sites for the abuse of power.

The plot builds slowly, although some of the scenes between Zeldin and the insufferably arrogant Sedgewick are almost unbearably tense. By the end of this volume, Zeldin has all but broken free of Sedgewick's hold on her. Sedgewick, however, has determined to escalate the struggle against the Marq'ssan. And the Marq'ssan appear to have realized that the liberation of Earth is going to be a more difficult task than they were ready for.

Not an easy or comfortable book, but one that rewards a thoughtful reader who is willing to give up simple action plots for a close consideration of political and social ideas. In fact, the closest comparison one might give is to some of LeGuin's later work—no small recommendation. Worth looking for.

WOKEN FURIES

by Richard Morgan
Del Rey, \$24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-47971-8

Morgan's stylish adventure fiction combines tropes of military SF and cyberpunk, with tough, cynical protagonists carrying on sharp struggles against long odds. Here he continues his Takeshi Kovacs series

with a look into some of the deeper roots of the culture his tough-guy protagonist comes out of.

The story begins with Kovacs on Harlan's World, his original home planet, wearing a synthetic body. (This future involves downloading of a person's mind into a nearly indestructible cortical stack, which can be implanted into another body—a "sleeve"—either by choice or after the death of the original body. This has the consequences you'd expect—plus a few more.)

Waiting in a bar while a bunch of local gangsters fulfill their end of a shady deal, he sees a young woman attacked by a pack of religious fanatics. He kills the attackers and escapes with the woman, Sylvie, who takes him to crash with a group of her friends until morning, when he can close his deal with the yakuza and get offworld. But Kovacs's luck has turned sour, and after another violent confrontation, he has no choice but to follow Sylvie's gang on an expedition into the outback, where they hunt down military robots, the relics of an advanced civilization.

Meanwhile, unknown to Kovacs, an assassin has been set on his trail—not just any assassin, but a version of himself at an earlier age. At the same time, Kovacs (after acquiring a new "sleeve"—an organic one, this time) finds out that Sylvie has a much more complex history than her youthful appearance suggests. In fact, she may be some kind of incarnation of Quelcrist Falconer—a charismatic revolutionary whose disciples Kovacs warred against in his previous life as an Envoy. Much of the latter part of the book consists of attempts to confirm Sylvie's identity, while dodging assassination attempts by Kovacs's younger self.

As in the earlier books of the series, Morgan generates a strong action plot, with a large element of violence. But he also uses the device of interchangeable bodies—something available to every character above poverty level—to throw the focus on questions of identity and self. Being stalked by his younger self, on his home planet, and meeting very old friends who nonetheless inhabit hard young bodies, throw the question of just who Kovacs is into sharp relief. As different as it is from Duchamp's dystopian vision, Morgan's book puts equal emphasis on close examination of our society's central premises, and hinting at some of the alternatives.

Recommended for those who enjoy hard-hitting thrillers that don't require them to disengage the brain before reading.

**THE VAMPYRICON:
THE PRIEST OF BLOOD**
by Douglas Clegg
Ace, \$19.95 (hc)
ISBN 0-441-01327-9

Here's a historical fantasy (or historical horror, if you prefer; depends on how you pigeonhole vampires) where the protagonist starts off at the bottom of the feudal pyramid, and no sooner drags himself up a couple of steps than he is kicked right back down.

The setting is Brittany, in the time of the Crusades. The narrator is one of several mixed-race children of a local prostitute, his father reportedly a Saxon merchant, long absent. Growing up on the fringes of society, young Aleric is tutored by his grandfather, a poacher, in the ways of the forest birds. This skill gains him a place in the baron's entourage as a falconer—a job title that replaces his name.

Life in the castle is a huge step up

in the world, and allows Falconer to give some measure of support to his mother and her many children. Two events bring him down: first, an affair with the baron's daughter; then his mother's arrest for practicing the old religion—now defined as witchcraft by the newly ascendant church. Attempting to enlist his lover's aid to clear his mother, Falconer oversteps and is sold into slavery. He winds up as a foot soldier in the crusades. Deserting after many hard battles, he enters a ruined city inhabited by a vampire, and becomes one of the undead, at which point the main action of the novel begins.

Clegg's vampires are the remnants of an ancient society, with a long mythological history. And once he awakens to what his new status means, Falconer finds himself thrust into a role he could not have anticipated, as the messiah figure of the vampire kind. He and a group of companions embark on a long, and vividly drawn, quest in fulfillment of the prophecies. But while he achieves his immediate goal, the reader learns that forces are brewing against him—including a highly unexpected one back in his native Brittany. The book ends with the promise of further conflict to come.

With its baroque mythologizing and its bottom-up look at the feudal class system, this one has the potential to strike an audience well beyond the normal readership for vampire tales. Not for those who dislike gore, though.

THE SINGULARITY IS NEAR **When Humans Transcend** **Biology**

by Ray Kurzweil

Viking, \$29.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-670-00384-7

The Singularity—broadly, the his-

torical watershed at which unaided human intelligence is surpassed by computers—is probably the single biggest idea in current SF. Here's a non-fiction look at what it all means, from one of the major gurus of Artificial Intelligence research.

Kurzweil makes clear his firm belief in the inexorable laws of technological growth, in particular what he calls the law of accelerating returns: not only is the power of technology to change the world increasing, it is accelerating at exponential rates. The future portends a radical breakthrough.

The real meaning of this power increase lies in the predicted growth of nanotechnology. Robots the size of red blood cells inserted into the body will make possible, within two decades, says Kurzweil, complete scanning of the human brain. Moreover, by then computer hardware will be able to run accurate software models of human intelligence. Within twenty-five years, he argues, artificial intelligence will pass the Turing test.

That alone would be impressive, but Kurzweil feels that the real breakthrough will be in a synthesis of the strengths of organic and machine intelligence. Our human strengths—pattern recognition, inference—will be even more powerful when aided by the instant recall of large bodies of data of which machines are capable. Nanotechnology will come to play on both sides of the human/machine divide; not only will machines far exceed the mental power of human brains, but humans will seize the opportunity to augment their own intelligence with nanotechnological implants.

Kurzweil goes on to predict that non-biological elements will eventually make up the majority of human intelligence, and that much of the

experience of future humans will take place in virtual reality. Eventually, this hybrid human/machine intelligence will expand to use all the resources of our solar system, and eventually to fill the universe.

Readers of Charles Stross's work undoubtedly recognize the broad outlines of this picture. Kurzweil offers his vision as sober technological forecast. Whether he has allowed enough room for Murphy's Law is a question that only time will answer. But if even the tamest of his forecasts come true, we are in for some interesting times.

THE LIFEBOX, THE SEASHELL, AND THE SOUL

by Rudy Rucker

Thunder's Mouth, \$35 (hc)

ISBN: 1-56025-722-9

Kurzweil preaches the Singularity as a true believer. Rudy Rucker, who has academic chops in computer science on top of his street cred as a founding cyberpunk, is a good bit more skeptical about transcending biology. Witness his latest nonfiction entry, an attempt to find the interface between the material and non-material worlds.

The book is in one key sense a meditation on the ideas of Stephen Wolfram, in particular the formulation: "It is possible to view every process that occurs in nature or elsewhere as a form of computation." Rucker admits from the outset that he isn't entirely sure whether he agrees with this premise, noting the "counterintuitive fact" that many apparently simple processes can yield unpredictable results. He is particularly taken by what he calls "gnarly computation," the apparently straight-ahead process that produces unexpectedly complex output.

The book develops by means of a dialectic among three elements: a lifebox, which is an imaginary gizmo in which one records one's life experiences; the soul, the essence of one's personality, which most of us would claim is too ethereal to be captured in any technological device; and the seashell, an organic creation that is nonetheless generated by the most mechanistic of laws. The seashell is one of Rucker's key examples of the gnarly; geometrical without being sterile.

Wolfram builds many of his insights on cellular automata, such as the fascinating computer game, "Life," in which seemingly simple rules lead to remarkable complexity. (You can download versions of the game at several points on the web.) What is most fascinating about the game is how an extremely small set of initial conditions produces results that seem uncannily lifelike—to choose a possibly apt metaphor.

For Wolfram, the obvious implication is that all the laws of physics (to take one example) could turn out to be embodied in a sufficiently sophisticated computation. (And in fact, many physicists would agree, as the ongoing search for a "Theory of Everything"—combining quantum physics with general relativity—makes clear.) And in the central section of this book, "Enjoying Your Mind," Rucker sketches a possible path from the physiology of the brain to a theory of consciousness.

But unlike Kurzweil's dead-serious portrayal of the march of progress, Rucker's book displays the playfulness that has always marked his fiction. Each of the book's larger sections is preceded by a short story suggesting some of its principal insights. There are innumerable illustrations, ranging from family photos to rough

computer schematics and illustrations of natural processes that resemble the output of a cellular automaton. He also refers regularly to his personal experiences, and provides links to his own (and others') web pages for those interested in exploring the subject further. And in the final chapter, he offers a set of

rules for a happier life—including "Turn off the machine."

Rucker's book is a good-humored and thoroughly engaging exercise in grappling with the big questions about computers, consciousness, and the structure of reality. If you've enjoyed Rucker's fiction, this nonfiction book is likely to be just your speed. ○

THE UNIFIED FIELD OF DREAMS THEORY

**There is a cornfield in an alternate Iowa
where all games can be won &
you find the old glove you left out in the rain
when you were twelve years old &
couldn't afford another.**

**The leather is perfectly conditioned &
fits your hand like a lover &
you will never miss another fly ball
although the sun is always bright &
warm & in your eyes &**

**the train goes right past the field &
a penny placed on the railroad track
becomes a perfect copper mirror where
you can see your future.**

**Even the games you lose will be close & well-played &
afterwards the other team will treat you to sundaes
at an ice cream parlor with a carousel outside &
you'll ride round & round forever
with the brass ring shining in the sun &
always within reach.**

—Laurel Winter

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Easter weekend is upon us, and the big Memorial Day weekend isn't far off. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2006

13-16—NorWesCon. For info, write: Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. Or phone: (206) 270-7850 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) norwescon.org. (E-mail) info@norwescon.org. Con will be held in: SeaTac WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Doubletree. Guests will include: L.M. Bujold, D. Giancola, R.J. Sawyer, Betsy Wolheim, Shella Gilbert.

13-16—FrolCon. frolcon.org. Crowne Plaza, Atlanta GA. "The Naughty Side of Paradise." Adults (18 & over) only.

13-16—EuroCon. (380-44) 455-3575. eurocon.kiev.ua. Kiev Ukraine. Sergey Poyarkov, Ellen Dattow, Eileen Gunn.

14-16—MiniCon. mnstf.org. Sheraton (ex Radisson) South, Bloomington MN. Harlan Ellison, Doug Friauf, John Picacio.

14-17—UK National Con. (650) 722-1413. eastercon2006.org. Glasgow Scotland. M.J. Harrison, E. Hand, B. Froud.

14-17—Australia Nat'l Con. conjure.org.au. Mercure Hotel, Brisbane. Cory Doctorow, Bruce Sterling, Sean Williams.

21-23—EerieCon. eeriecon.org. eeriecon@juno.com. Days Inn, Niagara Falls NY. H. Turtledove, T. Huff, E. Friesner.

21-23—RavenCon. ravencon.com. info@ravencon.com. Richmond VA. Terry Brooks, Tom Kidd, Lee & Alexis Gittiland.

21-23—PenguinCon. penguicon.org. info@penguicon.org. Sheraton, Novi MI. Open-source software & SF.

21-23—Malice Domestic. malicedomestic.org. Marriott Crystal, Arlington VA. K.H. Page, Griley, Barnard. Mysteries.

28-30—OLNFC, 22 Purefoy Rd., Coventry CV3 5GL, UK. theofficialleonardnimoyfanclub.com. Leamington Spa.

MAY 2006

4-7—Nebula Awards Weekend, c/o SFWA, Box 877, Chestertown MD 21620. (480) 423-0649. sfwa.org. Tempe AZ.

5-7—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org. Embassy Suites N., Phoenix AZ. Clark.

6—EgoCon, Box 5065, Wausau WI 54402. (715) 298-1640 or 573-3021. geocities.com/newfod2020. Stevens Point WI.

19-21—KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E7. (204) 669-6053. keycon.org. Radisson. R. Thompson, B.V. Toth.

19-21—MobiCon, Box 161632, Mobile AL 36616. mobicon.org. Billy West, Ellen Muth, Jody Lynn Nye.

26-28—MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. marcon.org. Hyatt. G.R.R. Martin, J. Lee, the Haymans, Roper.

26-28—Oasis, Box 592905, Orlando FL 32895. oasis.org. S. Brust, E. Mitchell, C. Ulbrich, R.L. Byers, J. McDewitt.

26-28—ConDuit, Box 11745, Salt Lake City UT 84147. conduitsfcon.org. Sheraton. B. Eggleton, L. E. Modesitt Jr.

26-29—BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737. balticon.org. Marriott, Hunt Valley. Gaiman, Wolfe.

26-29—BayCon, Box 610427, San Jose CA 95161. baycon.org. Doubletree. L. Niven, J. Pournelle, J. Burns, C. Miller.

26-29—MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 544-7083 miscon.org. Jerry Olson, Frank Wu, Dragon Dronet.

26-29—CostumeCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50323. cc24.dmsfs.org. Hotel Ft. Des Moines. Costumers' annual con.

26-29—ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171. kcsiencefiction.org. Airport Hilton. General SF/F con.

26-29—WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. sf3.org. Kate Wilhelm, Jane Yolen. Feminism and SF.

AUGUST 2006

23-27—LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com. Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. \$175.

AUGUST 2007

2-5—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org. Collinsville IL. 2007 No. American SF Convention. \$60+.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$180.

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Balticon 40 - Maryland Regional Science Fiction Convention. May 26-29, 2006. Neil Gaiman, Gene Wolfe, and more, 300 hours of programming. Info www.balticon.org or PO Box 686, Baltimore, MD 21203

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

Acclaimed British writer **Ian McDonald**, whose "The Little Goddess" was one of the most popular stories of 2005, returns next issue with our lead story for July—set in the same vivid and evocative future India, where ancient customs and dazzlingly sophisticated high-tech exist side-by-side—spinning a lavishly imaginative futuristic fairy tale of a young woman who risks everything to become "The Djinn's Wife," and who finds herself not only caught—quite literally—between two worlds, but forced to *choose* between them as well, with life or death as the stakes. This is sure to be one of the most important stories of 2006 as well, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN JULY

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** warns us that getting everything you've ever wanted can turn out to be a good deal more than most people can handle, in the sobering cautionary tale of how "Nano Comes to Clifford Falls"; new writer **Paul Melko**, author of such popular tales as "Strength Alone" and "The Summer of the Seven," returns with a compassionate story about how sometimes the right thing to do is, well, the right thing to do, no matter what the potential risks, even when it comes to harvesting "Snail Stones"; new writer **William Preston**, making his *Asimov's* debut, assures us that "You Will Go to the Moon"—whether it's the right thing to do or not; **Kathe Koja**, returning to these pages after a long absence, gives us a wistful, bittersweet look at some "Fireflies"; critically acclaimed writer **L. Timmel Duchamp** offers an intimate perspective on a woman distanced from the world in a way that no one has ever been before, in a moving portrait of "The World and Alice"; new writer **Tim Pratt** invites us along on a strange shopping expedition to an unlikely emporium, just the place for a lonely man to buy some "Impossible Dreams"; and new writer **Ted Kosmatka** spins a compelling tale of one man's struggle to survive in an alien wilderness with all the odds against him, and nothing keeping him going but his determination to make those who sowed it reap the "Bitterseed" of revenge.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines "The Thumb on the Dinosaur's Nose"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and, in our Thought Experiment feature, **Therese Littleton** takes us on a guided tour of the exciting new SF Museum in Seattle, while explaining its goal of "Preserving the History of the Future"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our July issue on sale at your newsstand on May 16, 2006. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

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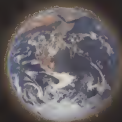
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